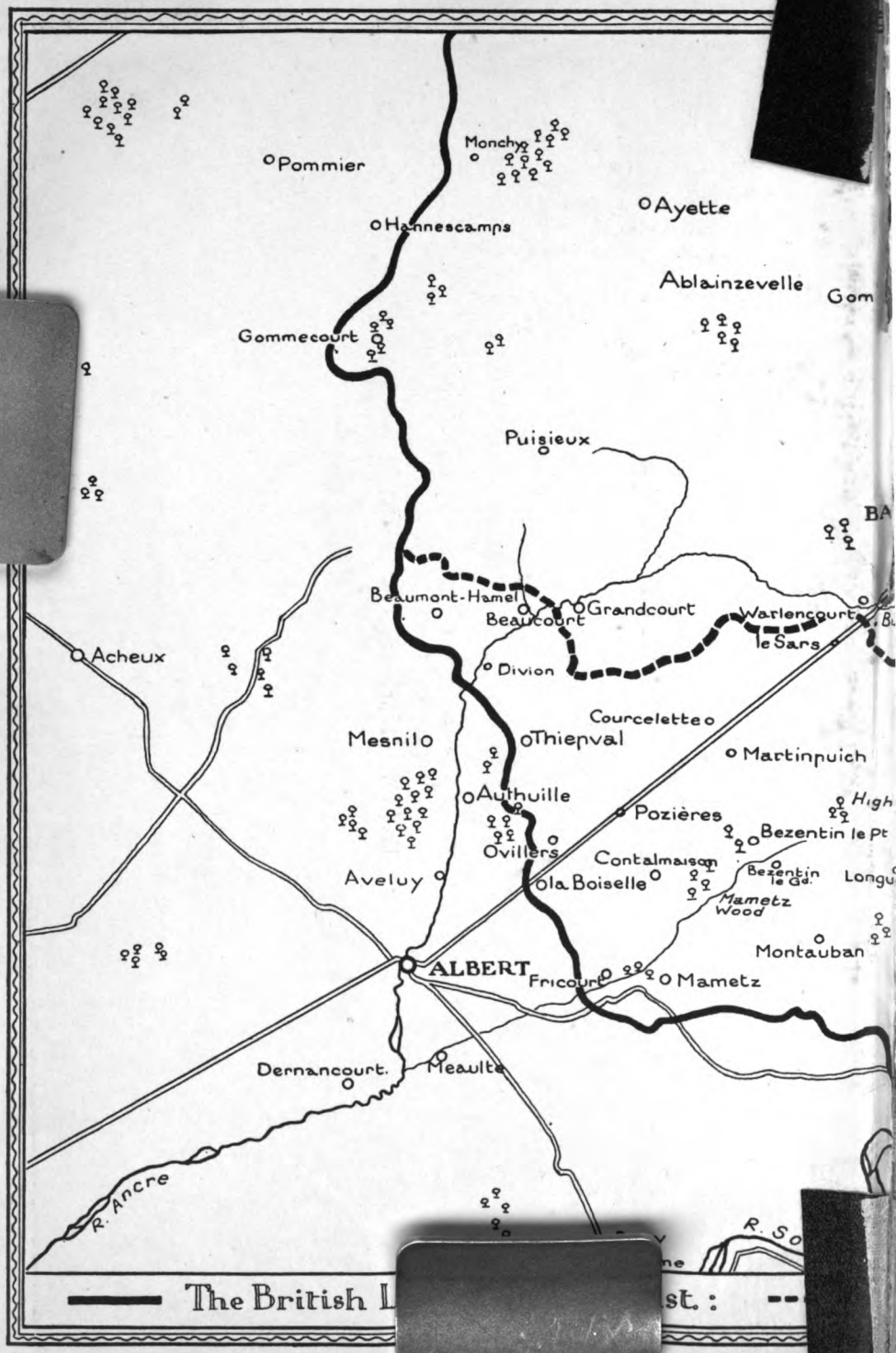
This is a reproduction of a library book that was digitized by Google as part of an ongoing effort to preserve the information in books and make it universally accessible.

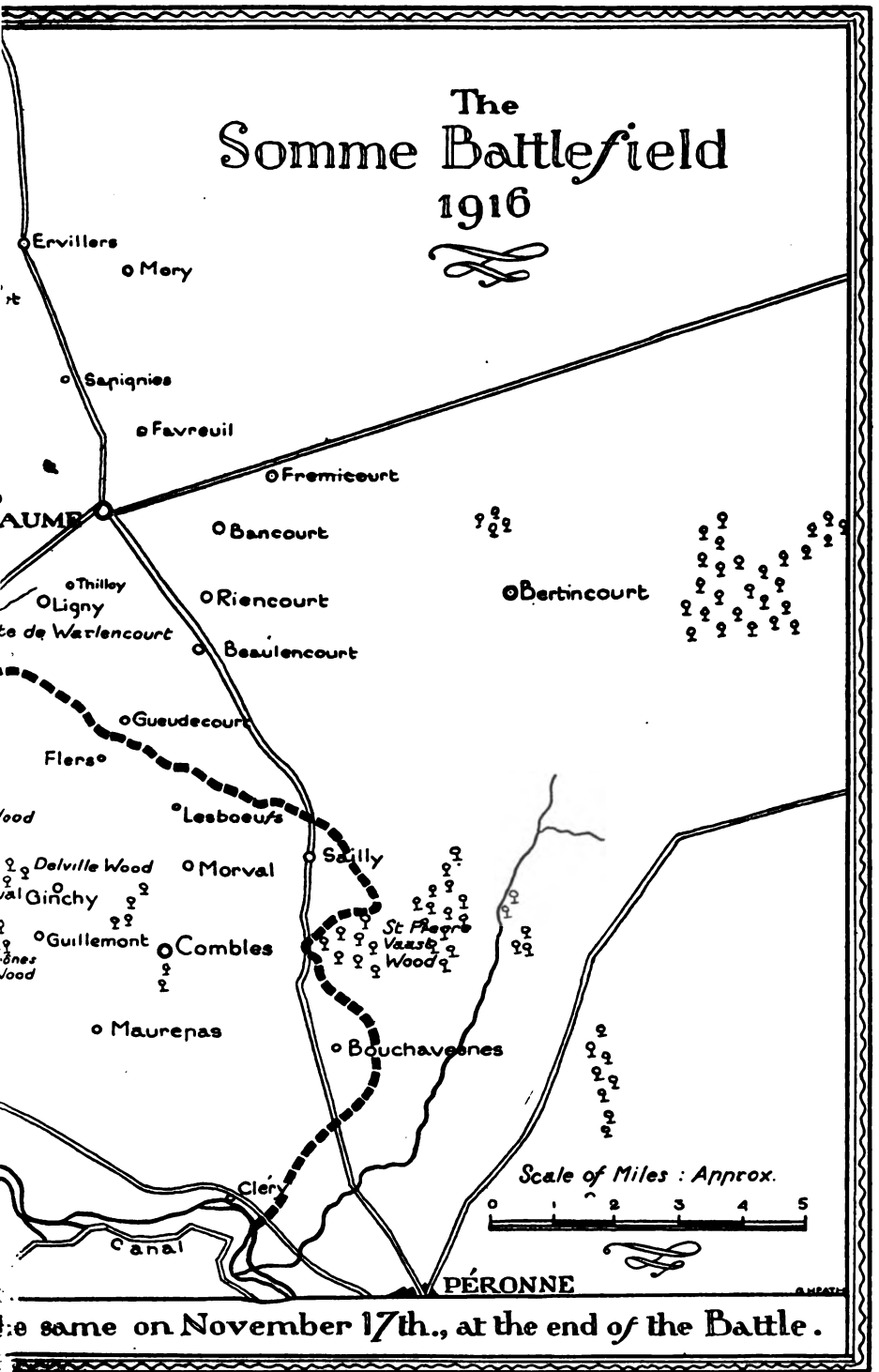
Google™ books

https://books.google.com

Digitized by Google



Digitized by Google



e same on November 17th., at the end of the Battle.

Digitized by Google

716 mm

INDIANA
UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

A SUBALTERN'S WAR

Digitized by Google

SOLDIERS' TALES.

Uniform with this volume.

MY SEVENTY-FIVE: JOURNAL OF A FRENCH GUNNER.
(Meuse, Marne, Aisne, 1914.)
By PAUL LINTIER (*September*).

MEMOIRS OF SERGEANT BOURGOGNE (1812–13).

PASSAGES IN THE GREAT WAR WITH FRANCE (1799–1810).
By SIR HENRY BUNBURY.

JOURNAL OF THE WATERLOO CAMPAIGN.
By CAVALIÉ MERCER.

RECOLLECTIONS OF RIFLEMAN HARRIS.

NOTE-BOOKS OF CAPTAIN COIGNET.

LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF MOTHER ROSS.
By DANIEL DEFOE.

ADVENTURES IN THE RIFLE BRIGADE.
By CAPTAIN KINCAID.

ADVENTURES IN THE REVOLUTION AND UNDER THE CONSULATE.
By MOREAU DE JONNÉS.
Translated by C. E. HAMMOND.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

"OVER THE TOP."

Digitized by Google

Charles Edmund Carrington

A SUBALTERN'S WAR

BEING

A MEMOIR OF THE GREAT WAR FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF A ROMANTIC YOUNG MAN, WITH CANDID ACCOUNTS OF TWO PARTICULAR BATTLES, WRITTEN SHORTLY AFTER THEY OCCURRED, AND AN ESSAY ON MILITARISM

by

CHARLES EDMONDS, pseud.

With Illustrations from Official Photographs

1929

LONDON: PETER DAVIES, LIMITED
30 HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN, W.C.2

Digitized by Google

D640
.C38

Published in July, 1929

INDIANA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Copyright

Printed in Great Britain by
Hazell, Watson & Viney, Ltd., London and Aylesbury.

Digitized by Google

TO THE MEMORY OF

PRIVATE J. P. BRADLEY

KILLED IN ACTION

12-8-65

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

PREFACE

In February, 1917, I first entertained the idea of writing a realistic account of the war in order to perpetuate, for my own interest, what I then recognised to be a very elusive atmosphere. During the next three years I made numerous attempts to carry out this plan, but never satisfied myself with the results of any one attempt well enough to make it worth while to complete the task. However, during 1919 and 1920 I wrote the two accounts of battles which form the principal part of this book. They were not intended for publication, and for several years modesty prevented me from showing them even to my friends. On a later consideration, I have decided to offer them to the public, because no war book written now, ten or fifteen years after the event, can secure the authenticity attaching to these two stories. They were not intended to be literary studies and I do not claim for them any literary merit: they are simply records of everything I could recall, every action, word or emotion, in a vivid personal experience which I felt to be beginning to fade from my memory. I wrote down what remained in my mind, adding nothing, omitting nothing, and

Digitized by Google

trying to rid myself alike of modesty and shame. At the time of writing I had access to the war diaries and other confidential papers of my battalion. By referring to them, to a journal which I kept irregularly at the front, and to my letters to my mother, I have been able to substantiate the main facts of these stories, which, to the best of my knowledge, are historically accurate. The rest of this book is composed of fragments from the same sources with a good deal of explanatory matter, which I venture to add for the information of any post-war readers of this book. It differs from most recent war books in being not a record of impressions received, but an account of how a young soldier occupied his time, and a list of the duties he was called on to perform.

Since many of the characters are still alive, I have thought it necessary to alter the names of all persons mentioned, including my own, and to change the numbers of all military units: otherwise there is no camouflage.

When fifteen million men are engaged for five years upon an arduous enterprise it is not likely that one or two classes of character will include them all. It is my hope that the rather romantic tone, taken (if I read him right) by that lad who ten years ago was I, may strike a responsive chord in the hearts of some old soldiers who are tired of the uniform disillusion of most authors of war books. For it is time that the world remembered that among

Digitized by Google

the fifteen million there were other types as well as the conventional 'Prussian militarists,' and the equally conventional 'disillusioned' pessimists.

Much has been written of those who died gaily and decently with faces to the enemy; much more of those unwarlike ones whom death still pursued as they fled from the field.

> *'Est et fideli tuta silentio*
> *Merces.'*

How many are there whose war story will never be told; yet they have their reward.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

CONTENTS

PAGE

PREFACE 7

CHAPTER I

BEGINNING OF A SUBALTERN'S WAR . . . 15

CHAPTER II

AN ADVENTURE ON THE SOMME 32

CHAPTER III

THE MIDDLE YEAR OF THE WAR . . . 113

CHAPTER IV

AN ADVENTURE IN THE THIRD BATTLE OF YPRES 129

CHAPTER V

THE END OF A SUBALTERN'S WAR . . . 186

Digitized by Google

EPILOGUE

PAGE

AN ESSAY ON MILITARISM 192

APPENDIX A

NOTE ON TRENCH WARFARE 213

APPENDIX B

FORMATIONS 222

Digitized by Google

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Reproduced by Permission from Photographs in the Imperial War Museum

[*Selected as Typical of the Scenes described, not as Authentic Portraits.*]

'Over the Top' . . . . *Frontispiece*

The attack on La Boisselle (34th Division). Troops advancing, July 1st, 1916.

FACING PAGE

Ovillers from La Boisselle 32

Old German trench. View from the Albert-Pozières Road. September 1916.

This trench was the 'jumping-off place' for the attack of July 15th described in Chapter II.

La Boisselle under Bombardment . . 64

Taken from the British support line trench shortly after the successful assault on July 3rd, 1916. Showing the Mine Crater and, in the immediate foreground, the British front line wire, and view across No Man's Land.

Ovillers: a Captured German Trench . 96

British Front Line in latter half of July 1916. The sentry, who has a periscope fixed to the end of his bayonet, is looking over what had been the parados of the trench. The fire-step as used by the Germans is seen on the left.

Digitized by Google

FACING PAGE

Stretcher-bearers in the Salient . . . 144
Carrying a wounded man through the mud: near Boesinghe, August 1st, 1917.

'The Limited Vision of the Mole' . . . 160
In a shell crater near the Wieltje-Gravenstafel Road, September 27th, 1917. A shell has just burst in the left foreground.

A Duckboard Track in the Salient . . . 176
A working party moving across the water-logged country near Wieltje, on the night of January 11th, 1918.

N.B.—Copyright of the above photographs is reserved by the Imperial War Museum.

Passchendaele: Before and After . . . 212
Aeroplane photographs of the village before and after the Third Battle of Ypres.

MAPS

PAGE

Ovillers and La Boisselle, July 5th, 1916 89

St. Julien and the Stroombeek, October 4th, 1917 157

For general maps of the Somme and Ypres battlefields, see end papers at the beginning and end of the volume.

Digitized by Google

A SUBALTERN'S WAR

CHAPTER I

1914—1916

BEGINNING OF A SUBALTERN'S WAR

§ 1

"Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth."

THE war caught up the author of these memoirs out of a country vicarage, with a garden full of delphiniums which seemed to go on flowering week after week in that splendid summer of 1914. A boy of seventeen, I lay in a hammock and ate plums—too many plums. We started a grand offensive (there was a family) against wasps' nests, and were not very brave. One of the girls was frightened of the dark even more than of wasps, and when I walked down the lane with her to a late party I shamefully showed that a very dark

Digitized by Google

lane made me feel creepy too. I might have gone to school for another year, but one day there was a crisis in Serbia reported in the morning paper, and I said wilfully that I would enlist as a soldier to fight for the Serbians. My uncle said: "You'll do nothing of the sort." Suddenly this crisis came out of the newspapers into real life and even into the village, where the butcher and the stationer stood at the street-corner being oracular for long periods which were punctuated by the arrival of trains from London, bringing special editions of the newspapers, full of lying rumours.

On August 4th, a roasting afternoon, my uncle and I went for a walk and met a sweating soldier on a bicycle looking for his colonel's private house. When we directed him we learned that he carried the mobilisation order, and late that night a notice at the post office told us that war was declared. The meetings at the street-corner with the butcher were feverish with excitement. No day passed in which spies were not shot in the Tower, or battleships sunk in the North Sea. The Army and Navy performed astonishing feats in which we all believed. The Hidden Hand of the Kaiser was everywhere. In our village there was a little barnstorming troupe of actors who played a repertory of melodrama in a wooden theatre, which happened to be burned to the ground a day or two after the war

Digitized by Google

began. Over the hot ashes stood the proprietor of this gallant little enterprise, complaining of nothing, but protesting that the Germans must have done him this ill turn. I wonder where the chance of war whirled him away.

At the vicarage our offensive against the wasps was maintained. We also bought maps of all parts of Europe and stuck little flags in them to mark the position of armies. My cousin had gone to the war, and the chauffeur and I planned to follow him. After several false starts I enlisted as a private soldier in a Kitchener's Army battalion and went into training in the Midlands. Before long my other cousins departed to war work and war marriages, until the family was scattered and holidays at the vicarage came no more.

In this story of the war there will be no disenchantment. No corrupt serjeant-majors stole my rations or accepted my bribes. No incompetent colonels failed to give me food and lodging. No casual staff officers ordered me to certain death, indifferent to my fate. After the war was over a fashion set in for decrying the efforts and defaming the characters of all those in authority in the war, but we never thought of such things in 1914, at least not in my regiment. Never were such splendid fellows assembled, never was such keenness to make order out of chaos, never

Digitized by Google

was such blind hero-worship as we paid to any soldier who would teach us his trade.

At first I was billeted in a cottage in a midland town with three other men, a clerk, a commercial traveller and a gas-fitter who was also a Communist. I 'mucked in,' that is, shared blankets and food and cleaning-kit, with the gas-fitter. We drilled every day for long hours in the park, at first in mufti and then in rather gaudy blue uniforms. Does anyone now remember that Kitchener's Army wore blue because there was not enough khaki to go round? We used to make a game of standing outside a picture palace pretending to be commissionaires and misleading enquirers. It was great fun being a private in Kitchener's Army, but for one absorbing problem. When should we get to the front? The winter passed; 1915 dragged on and still we stayed in England drilling. One was oppressed with fear that the war might end before we reached the front. Some men deserted to enlist again in regiments which they fancied might sooner go abroad. For my part, I got my uncle to pull some strings and was given an officer's commission in another regiment. If it was fun to be a Tommy, it was ten times more fun to be a subaltern in Kitchener's Army. There was scope. A thousand things had to be learned and taught to willing men. Leadership, the most heady and intoxicating draught for a young man, became a duty and a delight.

Digitized by Google

We vied with one another in caring for our platoons, and, off duty, carried ourselves with no end of swagger, each trying to be the devil of a fellow.

In the summer of 1915 the regiment went to France. It was a grave shock to find myself left behind as too young. From the glory of a service battalion, where everyone assumed that everyone else was keen and efficient, I was dropped into the wretchedness of a reserve battalion populated by all the failures and the faint-hearts, where the stout fellows had only one interest in life: to escape to France. Here a truth came to light. The further from the sound of the guns, the lower was morale. In the most dangerous places you found the best men. Not till December 1915, when I was eighteen and eight months old and had been a soldier for a year and three months, did I manage to get to the front. On Christmas night I crossed in a troopship to Havre, being extremely seasick all the way, and went for a few days to the base camp on the hill at Harfleur. With three other subalterns I was then sent 'up the line' to join the regiment in trenches some miles north of the Somme. This was the moment for which we had waited so long, and happy were we to arrive at the village close behind the lines where the quartermaster lived.

Digitized by Google

§ 2

Four very excited young men left their billets that January morning to join the battalion 'in the line.' It was far more like stepping out from the pavilion to bat for the first time in a match, than like waiting with horrid anticipation at the dentist's door. The war was still a picnic, or seemed so. The battalion was in 'cushy' trenches, that is to say, posted in an easy position where the enemy were not too near nor the gunfire too frequent. It was fine sunny weather, and if the front line trench was thigh-deep in mud, that mattered little, for it was almost all abandoned. Six platoon posts were drained dry and kept clean by arduous digging and pumping, and in each of them resided a serjeant with fifteen or twenty men to hold the front, while most of the battalion lived in dugouts scooped into the bank of a sunken road three hundred yards behind. Here was battalion headquarters, where the colonel, the senior major and the adjutant lived in great state, with a sentry before the door paraded as in Aldershot itself. Not far away lived the company commanders, each in a timbered cavity under the bank which he shared with his three or four subalterns. By day one officer of each company was forward 'in the posts,' the others dozed and gossiped, hunted rats with a terrier, watched the aeroplanes pursued across the zenith

Digitized by Google

by distant tiny puffs of smoke, which meant shrapnel from the 'archies,' the anti-aircraft guns. Sometimes there would be 'strafing'; our guns would arrange a shoot on some suspected enemy post and provide free entertainment for our lazy sightseers; or it would be the Germans who rained down storms of shrapnel; or flights of 'whizz-bangs'—small shells that came like thunderbolts out of a clear sky, so swift that you were not warned by the noise of their approach—broke up our merry party and sent the sightseers scurrying down the dugouts. This was all comedy, and taken as such. Everyone applauded if the guns scored a fair hit on a tree or house and brought branches or tiles crashing down. To stampede a group of loungers, or scatter a party of diggers was a good joke for which one gave due credit to 'brother Boche.' If he hit battalion headquarters or drove an inspecting general ingloriously to earth, that was the best joke of all. Only on rare occasions did the comedy turn to tragedy, for to the bitter end of the war it remained the greatest wonder that so much ammunition could be expended without hurting anyone but the taxpayer.

The first of these catastrophes which I saw gave me a truer impression of the danger. After two or three weeks at the front I was watching, as orderly officer, the giving out of tea from a great cauldron, or 'dixie,' to a queue of men

Digitized by Google

standing in the sunken road. Without warning a whizz-bang pitched on the bank and burst among us. Tea and men were flung in all directions. In an instant there was a scramble for the dugout. Some men staggered and fell. Dizzy and scratched, but not hurt, I found myself holding a big serjeant who was hit in the thigh, and was collapsing in my arms. Behind us on the ground a man lay groaning, but it was some seconds before I dared turn and look, afraid of what horror I should see. I busied myself dragging into shelter and bandaging the serjeant, while others attended to the groaning man. In two minutes there was no sign of the disaster; in twenty all the men off duty were lounging again in the lane, cleaning rifles, picking the lice off their shirts, laughing and joking, just as before. But I never knew the same care-free feeling in the sunken road again. I found myself inclined to cock an eye or an ear perpetually in the direction whence that shell had come.

By day there was really not very much to do. Sometimes working parties could be organised, if the trench to be dug or drained was passable by daylight. A memorable day it was when two of us had drained a long communication trench called Fifth Avenue, penning the mud and water behind a temporary dam of clay, in a dead end—a grand game of mud pies for a boy on a spring morning. Then came news that the brigadier

Digitized by Google

and his staff were coming up the trench. Now trenches wind in curious zigzags lest enemy guns should be able to rake them, shooting along them in a straight line from end to end. The brigadier, though only a few yards away, could see and know nothing of our doings round the corner. We broke down the dam, releasing a flood of liquid slime, knee deep, glutinous, stinking, which swept him away. No gilded staff officers appeared after that to interrupt our innocent ease in the front line.

Mostly the world slept by day. When dusk fell, allowing movement over the top, a hundred strange activities began on both sides of No Man's Land. Troglodytes emerged from their burrows in the sunken road to relieve the platoons in the posts, to bring up rations from the village, to dig and wire in pitchy darkness. Heavy labour at a score of trades in awkward places must be relentlessly performed without showing a light or making a sound. Some skilled officers and men crawled, boy-scout fashion, to listen and observe near the enemy's lines; some wrestled like the slaves that built the Pyramids at dragging baulks of timber, coils of wire and engineering tools by main force to the line; some with torn and bleeding hands struggled Laocoon-like to twist and strain new strands of barbed wire into the entanglement a few yards in front of the posts. The ceaseless watch was doubled, and

Digitized by Google

sentries strained their eyes through the darkness, peering over the parapet into the open field (the Racecourse, they called it) bounded two hundred yards away by the German wire entanglement, behind which in equal darkness and silence the unseen, unheard enemy watched and sweated and laboured in just the same way. A sniper's bullet cracked now and again across the Racecourse at some suspected movement, but no one took any notice. For some reason a frenzied burst of shell-fire would scatter the workers for an hour and disorganise a night's routine, or perhaps all would be silent save for mutterings and rumblings from the livelier parts of the line fifty miles away. Some nights in the trenches were deathly still, enlivened only by uncanny greenish rockets, Verey lights, which the Germans fired over No Man's Land in great profusion.

When the dawn broke, everyone stood to arms. Sentries and their reliefs, working parties and sleepers in dugouts, rose, took their rifles and stood in their battle positions watching the sky grow grey. Snipers fired a round or two to hearten themselves; machine-gunners loosed off a couple of hundred rounds to drive away belated wanderers from the top of the opposing trenches; men who had toiled all night yawned and stretched, listening to the eerie whining of bullets overhead. Then came rum issue. An officer with the jar under his arm passed round giving half a

Digitized by Google

gill of raw rum in a mug to every man, an occasion of much crude jesting and good humour. The sun was now up; the word was given to stand down, and but for drowsy sentries all the world retired to sleep in its clothes for the day. Across the road the Germans were doing just the same. One might be weeks in the trenches without seeing or hearing anything of the enemy except his shells and bullets. A thread of blue smoke from his trenches at breakfast time when you too were cooking bacon over a charcoal brazier; a flitting figure in the distance caught in the glare of a rocket; a head and shoulders, seen from the sniper's loophole, leaping past a gap in the enemy's parapet; a rumbling of wheels from his wagons far behind the line at night; these and the ghostly Verey lights alone certified that his trenches were occupied by human beings too.

The brigade, of four battalions, had two battalions in the line, one in support living at a little château a mile from the trenches, and the fourth resting in peace at a village two or three miles back. Every eight days they all changed places. Month in, month out, from the autumn of 1915 to the spring of 1916 this 'tour' of duties went round. Nothing made much difference save when in February heavy snow made all open air life unbearable, and in March when the Boches favoured us for a week with their

Digitized by Google

'travelling circus,' a group of batteries that visited various parts of the line with concentrated bursts of shell-fire. In these days I was very happy. This was *Life*, and if one was occasionally frightened out of one's wits, a sudden fright never did a young man any harm. One night I took part in a highly organised raid on the German trenches and thoroughly enjoyed it, although it was a total failure costing twenty casualties. To lie breathless in the German wire with a storming party of volunteers, armed with clubs and made invisible in the darkness by having our faces blacked, was a splendid adventure; and who cared for the rifle bullets stabbing through the dark point-blank, as the Germans drove our wire-cutters from their task?

In April the whole brigade marched back twenty miles to rest in a delightful village bright with apple blossom among green downs. Never was any picnic, any country holiday so enjoyable or so enjoyed. Not to be dirty, not to be hungry, not to be overtired, these were all a man asked, and only he who knows weariness, hunger and dirt can appreciate their removal. 'Rest' in the Great War meant stiff military training all the morning and games in the afternoon. We young fellows enjoyed the parades and were mustard keen, though we naturally grumbled about one thing and another. We slept under a canvas sheet in an orchard overlooking the

Digitized by Google

valley, ragged one another like schoolboys, and spent much time eating and sleeping.

One day there was a reminder. Three men were blown up in a trench mortar accident before the whole brigade. "Mais, que voulez-vous? C'est la guerre; à la guerre comme à la guerre," as the French peasants replied to every objection.

§ 3

When we went back to the trenches a new spirit was abroad. May and June 1916 mark to the historian a crisis in the war. The Irish Rebellion, the Battle of Jutland, the death of Kitchener in quick succession filled the English newspapers with vague alarms, which were reflected still more vaguely on the armies in France, where the initiative was passing from the Germans to the Allies. All the spring the Germans had been hammering at the French lines round Verdun, and their blows were now losing weight. The German offensive having spent itself, the allied offensive was soon to begin. Every recruit could see new batteries springing up in the night among the woods, violent activity in the skies, for spring brings in war something more than primroses and swallows. Trenches and roads were doubled and redoubled. More men came into the line, filling our familiar rest-billets with strange regiments, thronging our roads with guns

Digitized by Google

and wagons, crowding our dugouts, and leaving us only a narrower section of the front line to hold. The trenches were no longer 'cushy.' Raids took place almost every night to see what damage the guns had done by day; and what we did to them the Boches sought faithfully to do to us. These activities steadily increased, the noise growing daily louder and life getting harder, until the famous First of July, the opening of the Battle of the Somme, the most violent and ruthless battle in the history of the world.

We did not attack that day. It was our part to loose off a cloud of smoke and gas which blinded a section of the German line, making a poisonous screen to cut their defence into two halves which could not support each other. Mr. Masefield in his book, 'The Old Front Line,' has described that day, which it is no part of my purpose to describe here. All the enthusiasm of two million volunteers trained for two years at home and in quiet trenches was focussed on this day when the citizen soldiers, Territorials and Kitchener's Army, met the army of Frederick the Great, of Blücher, of Moltke, very old at war, on equal terms.

What we saw of the battle was a failure. World-shaking bombardments which made our little memories of trench warfare ridiculous, hurricanes of shell-fire, hurled on us by the

Digitized by Google

Germans in retaliation, glimpses through the smoke of attack and counter-attack on our right and left, came to nothing, till the regiments which had advanced in the morning crept back in the evening to their own lines, leaving three-quarters of their men dead or wounded in the German trenches. We were thirteen days in the line without a relief and without shell-proof dugouts. We lost seventy men killed and wounded by shell-fire ; about one in seven of our numbers.

I do not remember that we were in the least discouraged by the failure of our part of the battle. On July 5th we were withdrawn from the line to a village five or six miles away where we bivouacked in a grassy dell. It was a wet summer and not pleasant for sleeping on the ground under little open wigwams of brown canvas, yet morale was very good, better than usual. Every day *communiqués* were posted in the camp telling of the progress in other parts of the battle, how Fricourt, Mametz and Montauban had been captured, and of the heavy fighting at La Boisselle. At this time, too, we were thrilled by the news from the Russian front, where General Brussiloff was winning in Galicia the last victories of the Czar's empire.

Every day a company or two would be roused at dawn to march deviously up to the trenches, avoiding observation as far as possible by the German kite balloons hanging in the distant

Digitized by Google

sky—faint specks that reminded me of caterpillars hanging by a thread, save that they hung upwards in the sky, not downwards like caterpillars. Near the front line there was much work to do making new trenches or repairing old ones destroyed by German shells on July 1st. The companies who stayed in camp drilled in the morning and idled in the afternoon. One day someone organised a cricket match, officers versus serjeants. In the evenings there was a troupe of pierrots, the divisional concert party, performing in a barn.

On Sunday at Church Parade the whole brigade attended, and we were horrified to see how few were left of the two battalions which had 'gone over the top' on July 1st. But this was not a melancholy occasion: it was enlivened by a speech from Lieutenant-General Sir ———, of whom so many comic stories were current. He commanded the whole Army Corps of 80,000 men, and was a very great man indeed. Nothing irritates the soldier so much as heroics, for which this general was renowned. He strode into the midst of the brigade and poured forth such a wealth of what Stalky called 'jelly-bellied flag-flapping' that our own general blushed for shame and the rear ranks shook with ill-concealed giggles. The great man retired convinced that he had made a good impression.

From such circumstances we were whirled

Digitized by Google

away by the fortune of war into the vortex of the battle about La Boisselle. Until the moment came there was little speculation about our fate, for one learnt to live for the day only during the war.

The episode, of which I wrote a complete account in the days when it was fresh in my mind, began in the middle of July 1916.

Digitized by Google

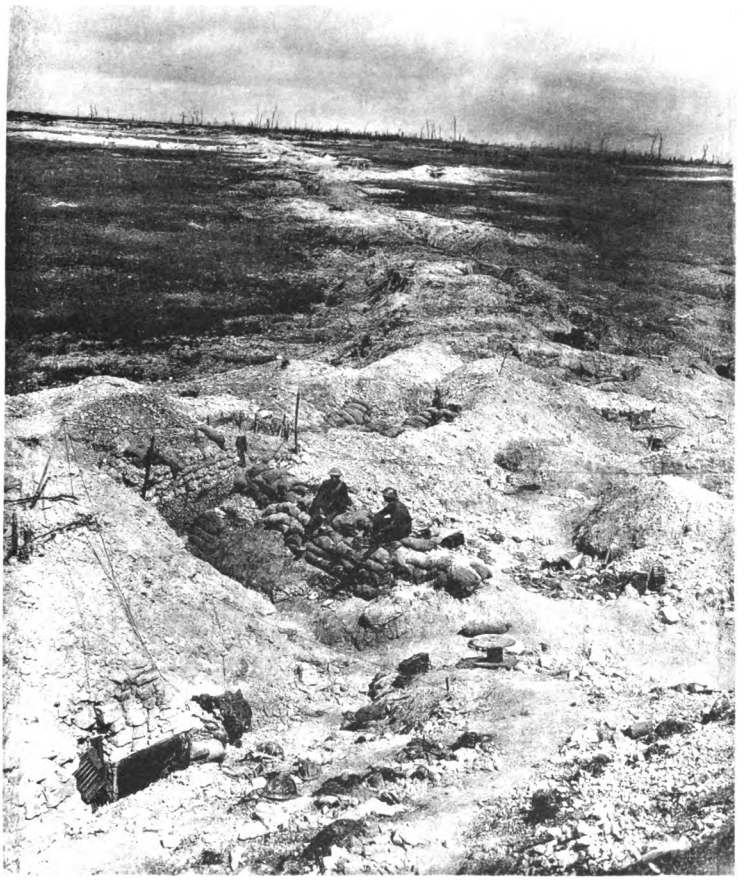
CHAPTER II

AN ADVENTURE ON THE SOMME

§ 1

ONE day I went out early with a hundred men and the usual instructions—to report to the Royal Engineers at a point given me by map reference. I had two junior subalterns with me and we marched by platoons a hundred yards apart, a formation we always used in case of being shelled. We went up the road to the Dell, then by a cart-track along a hollow across the plains, always with an eye for enemy balloons that might be watching, to a row of old gunpits near the sugar factory. There the Sappers took my men, dotting them on various jobs of trench repair, and thereabouts through the maze of old French trenches I wandered supervising. Soon after midday we started back on our five-mile walk home, and on the top of the rise saw the battle flare out again over Mailly-Maillet to the south—the roaring of the heavies, the distant metallic thud of the shrapnel, the white puffs of smoke that merged and blended into a heavy grey pall.

Digitized by Google



OVILLERS FROM LA BOISSELLE

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

As we approached the Camp there seemed to be an air of excitement. I dismissed the party. No one could tell me definitely what was astir. The Colonel had gone to Fricourt on a 'Cook's tour' of last week's battlefield. The Second in Command was out somewhere and we had had an order to move. Bickersteth, my company commander, had been whirled off to Division for orders. We were to get ready. And even then he came flying down the hill in a car. We ran to meet him.

"We've got to move by motor bus in half-an-hour," he shouted. "Get the servants to pack the mess-box, Edmonds," he went on, turning to me, "and Edmonds," as I turned away, "will you see to the Lewis-guns? And hurry the men up."

I dashed away, with my head full of heroics, almost ashamed of these trivial duties.

"And Edmonds," he shouted after me, "go round the lines and see they are tidied up."

Then followed half-an-hour's frenzy—rolling of blankets, loading of Lewis-gun carts, strapping of valises, finding fatigue parties for the Doctor, the Orderly Room, the Pioneers, the stores, the transport, passing rumours and orders, improvising, cursing, sweating. And as the lorries drew up to the camp and the men were falling in, here came C. Coy, who had gone out at three in the morning on a far more distant job

Digitized by Google

than mine and were now returning dead beat. Never mind. It was three in the afternoon and time to go. They must turn to and pack up, while we loaded our stores, and jammed our men on the lorries, tighter than fowls going to market in a crate.

At last we start over the chalky dusty downs. I sit beside the driver, who tells me we are going to Bouzincourt.

Along the Route Nationale from Doullens to Albert I hardly realised what was coming. My mind only treated the affair as a doubtful adventure. It was the same feeling that I had on my first day at school—a blankness, a numbness of intellect. But for that curious hungry feeling, the coming battle seemed only like an adventure in a book. "Realise," said I to myself, "you know what shelling is in a trench. You have sat and shivered as the crumps fell closer. Now you are going to be shot at in the open field. You have heard the bullets crack round your ears. Next time you will have to face them. There will be no taking cover. And you are going to meet your enemy face to face."

But I could not frighten myself. There was already glowing in me, and I think in most of us, the first exaltation of battle. I was uplifted in the spirit, and could only watch and almost gloat over the warlike preparations around. For

Digitized by Google

we were moving along dusty roads that passed by camps and wagon-lines, shell dumps and hospitals, and from the villages came curious throngs of men with a steely light shining in their eyes, an exalted look which I often noticed again after a battle. They were the men who had come through the furnace.

Through these days of battle one lived in an elevated state of mind which a doctor might have defined as neurosis. The strange sense of dual personality which comes to so many people at moments of high tension was hardly ever absent. There was an arguing realism, a cynical side to one's nature that raised practical objections and suggested dangers, and against it there strove a romantic ardour for the battle that was almost joyful. While the mind took sides and disputed with itself, the body seemed numb and void. An emptiness almost like a physical pain tormented my bowels: the naked fear, basest of human emotions, fighting its way up from the subconscious and finding a voice in that part of my mind which reasoned and realised. Sometimes one was swayed by the delight of achievement, sometimes dragged down by fear. Always the struggle within, fought behind the dark curtains which screen the hidden springs of conduct, was more real than the physical struggle without, and the practical details of life passed by like an illusion.

Digitized by Google

We halted behind the chalk ridge above Bouzincourt in an hour or so, and disembarked. There were some minutes of inaction as the battalion formed up in a field beside the road. Packs were taken off, rations issued and we lay down to await orders. Our mess-box had little in it, of course, but we ate some bread and tinned salmon and felt a little better. Bickersteth suggested gently enough that more care would have been wise before such a move, and I admitted one point of advantage in his fussing. Further I remembered here that the gramophone had not been brought. Bickersteth had seen it, though, and had left it in charge of the Pioneers who did not come with us. As a matter of fact we never saw it again.

Now a fit of depression seized me. I was cramped, dirty and hungry, and annoyed that I had failed in my duty as Mess President; and to occupy my mind, I got ready all the things I should want in 'fighting order.' Less cheering still was the rumour that we were going up to La Boisselle, a newly captured village, at dusk, and a map was issued to us—just a rough sketch showing the present position of the lines, which seemed very confused. But soon we had definite orders to move at nine, which was dusk, to the white house on the cross-roads at La Boisselle; so an hour or two of peace was left us.

That road was like a pageant. The quieter

Digitized by Google

men lay down, but the younger ones, officers and men, ran about like children to see the sights. Someone saw a monoplane coming, a queer flat squarish thing. It didn't look British. It came straight for us. Was it a Taube? There was a little panic of pleasant excitement. It dived. It swooped straight at us, crowded in the field. At last we saw the Allied marks on it. It came down faster till the pilot leaned over and waved to us. We could see him smile. Then as the men scattered and his screw was whirring right upon us, he lifted again, cleared the trees along the road by a miracle and sailed away. He, too, was exalted with the battle.

Then two slow tractors lumbered into view drawing long Naval guns. "Six-inch," said someone. "Twelve-inch," said another, and a little crowd dashed to the roadside to see them.

Before they had gone a party came marching over the brow headed by a horseman. Heavy, loose-limbed men they were in a slaty grey uniform. Their faces were pasty with fatigue, the growth of several days stood on their chins, their eyes were dull and they walked despairingly. Someone saw the gleam of red on their caps.

"Allemans," he shouted, "come on, lads"; and away went another group to watch them with friendly curious eyes, with the look of men who watch a caged animal.

But the greatest excitement was when with

Digitized by Google

jingling harness two squadrons of cavalry trotted by, English Lancers and then Indians, with gleaming equipment and clean new helmets, on their way to High Wood where they would charge through the broken German lines.

"'Struth," shouted a man of ours, "it's Cavalry. We've got 'em on the run." And all the battalion believed it.

Last, as we were forming up to go, two subalterns of another regiment came up to me. They appeared to have had their turn and were interested in ours.

"You'll be all right," they said comfortingly, "we've got the Boche taped. You just go over the top and rush for it. If you don't get there you're only wounded. The Boches are shooting very low. Most of our chaps were hit in the legs."

§ 2

We marched off dragging our Lewis-guns by ropes attached to little hand-carts. At the top of the hill smoking was forbidden, and we marched down the other slope into Bouzincourt. For the time fear had gone. In the dusk many men came out and looked at us from the mud houses that lined the road.

"Their companies are as strong as our battalions," said a man bitterly by the roadside. I realised then a new thing, we were fresh troops

Digitized by Google

compared with these weary ones. Our long purgatory before and after July 1st was nothing to the hell they had endured.

Next a new type of man rushed out and spoke to me, a tall, gaunt man in a slouch hat.

"What lot are you?" he asked me. "You're the best looking crowd I've seen down here."

That was the proudest moment of my life. My regiment had been praised by an Australian. Even an Englishman does not often volunteer a good opinion of another regiment.

We marched down a long slope with transport lines in a hollow on our right, and into the dingy suburbs of a town that I took to be Albert; but I began now to think more of the guns, for on all sides we became aware of heavy batteries hidden in heaps of ruins or among trees, and every few moments one of them would fire. The moon was brilliant as we marched under the railway arch into the deserted town. Most of the walls and roofs were standing, but the moon showed the windows as squares of blackness, where no glass was throwing back her beams.

In one street stood an empty factory with its girders twisted and battered into writhing shapes of rusty iron, and its productions, which appeared to be sewing machines, lying in gaunt and useless heaps among the wreckage. Then came a large, barrack-like girls' school, empty and deserted; beyond that the street curved round into a wide

Digitized by Google

space where the houses were levelled to the ground and straggling weeds grew over their ruined heaps of brickwork ; but nothing caught the eye then save the huge mass of the basilica on the left, that church which lost its modern pretentiousness in the dignity of its fate, and over which towered the far-famed campanile bearing on its summit the golden virgin of Albert. The colossal figure, struck by a shell, was bent forward and stretched horizontally over the street. I had seen it before from the top of Henencourt hill, but never had I been so profoundly moved as in passing under its outstretched arms that caught the gleam of the moonlight a hundred feet above us. Something of the dramatic fitness of the silhouetted mass against the sky, topped by this golden figure, seized the imagination of the long columns who marched below, speaking only in whispers. The melodrama of it rose strongly in our hearts.

We turned into the Rue de Bapaume and marched between lines of squalid houses, over a railway crossing and out of the town. The proximity of war came more to our notice. The battery of six-inch long guns that we had seen earlier in the day was halted on the road here, and near them we turned into a field on the right. The last house of Albert—the Red House, we called it—was just behind us.

The battalion formed in mass, and the ominous

Digitized by Google

order was passed down to dump packs and change into fighting order. Now the cold fear clutched at the bowels of men who had missed a night's sleep and a day's good food. I began to congratulate myself that I had made ready my fighting order at the last halt and plumed myself above those who groped in the dark for food and utensils. The time was so short that many were without what was needful. Some order was established in the dark, for it was unsafe to show a light; packs were heaped in piles by companies; the transport and the quartermaster-serjeants stayed and we fell in again. After much delay the battalion shook out into platoons at intervals of fifty yards along the straight broad road that led like an arrow to Bapaume. It rose gently up the long slope to Tara Hill, flanked on either side by a ditch and a line of stunted scorched trees. It was more uneasy work marching with these little groups. The very fact of this scattering gave cause for fear, as this formation would not have been used unless shell-fire was expected. The night was growing darker. The moon had gone, and from the deserts that might be dimly descried on either hand came strange noises, the stamping, snorting, shuffling and jingling of unseen horses, the roar and flash of invisible guns, and a multitude of sounds faint and distant but unexpected and cloaked in darkness. There

Digitized by Google

were many halts on the road : I had to run forward to see that touch was maintained, to run back and bring up the rear, endlessly to wait with nerves on edge while slow coming messages were passed down explaining incomprehensible faults and checks in the column. It felt lonely to be more than a few yards from some friendly group of human beings. At last progress ceased altogether. Other traffic was thick on the road. A battalion in front, unknown to us, was holding up the column. A battalion behind recklessly marching in fours was pressing on our heels. Regardless of all the rules of march discipline they came past us at a swinging pace, smoking and whistling, with a cheery colonel marching at their head.

" Excuse me, sir," I said, when he came abreast of me ; " you're in view of the Boches here. It isn't safe to smoke, and you're breaking up our column."

" I can't help that," he said, " I'm going on."

And they marched on. There were now three battalions jammed on the road, and before we should be hopelessly confused and cut off from our head, we too closed up our column from the rear, until three parallel battalions in fours were halted near the crest of Tara Hill.

I was intensely nervous. If any firing had begun we should have been thrown into utter confusion, for a high bank on our right and a

Digitized by Google

well trodden morass some feet below us on the left, would have prevented any ordered deployment. We waited fretting for an endless period of time. It was no easier when a sharp bombardment began a mile in front of us. Somehow the way cleared and we went on over the crest and down into a valley with a shattered copse on our right. This was clearly the battle zone, for the metalling had vanished from the road and we marched over stiff clay sodden after the heavy rains. The wilderness to right and left seemed drearier and more silent, and we began to meet stragglers coming down from the front line. Two mud-covered men came by carrying petrol tins for water, then a stretcher party bearing a dark young man whose face seemed set with a greenish pallor, then a solitary wounded man with a bloodstained bandage on his arm, nursing his wound and crooning to himself with low hysterical sounds, sobbing and cursing.

"Halt at La Boisselle," had been our orders, "take the turning half right at the cross-roads and halt at the first house on the left—a white cottage."

We came at the bottom of the valley into a new country. It was a desert of broken chalk—ditches, holes, craters, mounds and ridges, dry and thinly overgrown with weeds, and all inter-

Digitized by Google

laced with rusty strands of wire. The road vanished in this waste, hard by a great mountain of gleaming white chalk on our left.

At this point, quite unexpectedly a 4.2 howitzer shell came jubilantly sailing over and crashed into the chalk beside us with an air of almost human satisfaction at having surprised us. There was a little waver along the ranks, for manifestly we were getting lost, and the march was suffering yet another check. Then came another shell falling closer, a crescendo of sound rising to a high note as it reached the top of its trajectory, falling, as it came near, to a low sibilant roar. It burst with a crash and a buzz of flying splinters, close by, and we cowered into shell-holes and under banks. Then shells came over one by one at regular intervals. It began to dawn on me that the head of the column must be in La Boisselle, that this was our objective.

"This is going to be a bloody business," I said to Suckling, who was beside me, for he was marching at the head of his company, I at the rear of mine.

"Well, it won't help us if we get the wind up," he said rather pointedly. Those were his last words to me, for at that moment I saw Bickersteth in front of me directing the company down into a trench on my right.

"Get the men under cover," he shouted to me, and I ran about, finding shelter for groups of

Digitized by Google

men in ditches and craters near by. Crouching in the dark as the whine of the shells and the crashing explosions came, the men spread about off the line of the road. Soon we became aware that on our right was an extensive trench system, and into this the C.O. was marshalling the companies. We herded the men down into a shallow trench across our front and slowly moved along it into a maze of turnings. Richardson brought his platoon along over the open trying to break in ahead of me, and as second in command I warned him off. He subsided grumbling, for he was old enough to be my father and obeyed me unwillingly.

The trench we followed was wider now and deeper, a ten-foot furrow through the chalk, blocked here and there by the smashed doorways of dugouts and the ruin of fallen traverses and bridges, for it was German ground and had suffered much from the effect of our bombardment. The two companies in front of us led off into different sections of the system and at last a rough area was left us. We pushed on and found a deep mine dugout with two entrances. Company Headquarters and one platoon went in here, and the rest of our scanty hundred were stowed away in nooks and corners of the trench under the shelter of low bridge traverses, or in the mouths of abandoned or damaged shafts. Some made shift to scoop into corners of the trench

Digitized by Google

wall, and undercut little caves for one or two. The remainder were accommodated two deep sitting all down the steps of the dugout. So we settled for the night.

The bombardment slackened for an hour or two and we improvised a meal. There was little but bread and bully beef, but the servants were indefatigable. I felt triumphant on finding that of four officers, I alone had brought a mess-tin and a knife and fork. We shared things somehow, and Bickersteth, Richardson and Wells settled down to sleep. This was the first German dugout we had seen, and I felt the romance of our position too strongly to sleep just then. It was a long, narrow chamber with a steep stairway leading up to the trench at each end. It was lined with rough planks and had room only for two rows of home-made bunks—wire netting stretched over wooden frames, a shelf which could be used as a table, two or three chairs, and the narrow gangway from end to end. There was a strong, stale, fetid smell of sweat and decaying paper and old clothes, permeated by the solid flavour of the earth that lay 15 feet thick above our heads. The floor was littered with dry cakes of mud, scraps of paper, old messages and documents, English and German, rags and fragments of food. There was a general feeling of filthiness. A thousand messes had spilled and soaked into the table; gutterings and

Digitized by Google

soot abounded where candles had stood on any projection of the woodwork; the beams were shining greasily from the touch of grimy hands; there was nothing in the room that was not smeared with muddy fingermarks.[1] Men were packed close into this corridor and lying comatose in every corner. Their limbs, flung in careless attitudes, lay across each other as they crowded on the beds or huddled on the floor. By the dim candlelight I could specially see the bristles showing on my neighbour's chin, for his beard grew very strongly. He was dozing fitfully with a pained expression on his face. I felt angry with him for he seemed so careless about it all.

With a terrific detonation a shell burst in the trench above.

" 'Struth," said the man on the top step of the shaft, shifting uneasily and crouching into cover. I looked round. Everyone else in authority looked invidiously asleep and unconcerned. It made me angry to see them all snoring heavily when there was trouble outside. Ought I to go up and see if all was well? It felt very safe and comfortable down here.

" How are you getting on up there? " I shouted up the shaft.

" All right, sir," a voice replied, " but they're dropping very close." There was a tinge of

[1] I became lousy for the first time in my life in this dugout and blamed the Germans for it.

Digitized by Google

envy in the voice too. It was all very well for me, it seemed to imply, shouting up from the bottom of the dugout. I hesitated a moment longer. Why should I go up ? Bickersteth hadn't put me on duty. He'd just gone to sleep and left me. I forgot the work he had done, the responsibility he had taken, that the whole organisation of the move had fallen on him when the C.O. had been away earlier in the day.

Crash ! came a shell right at the mouth of the shaft. The roof rocked ; the air of the dugout vibrated ; the pressure of it seemed multiplied tenfold.

The man on the top step flung himself down a step, cursing and cowering into the already overcrowded shaft.

There was no help for it. I picked my way up the steep flight of rough steps, stooping under the low roof, climbing over the limbs of drowsy men who squatted two on each steep and narrow stair. As soon as I began to move the fear dropped from me a little, and sitting near the mouth of the shaft I fancied myself a hero. " Let them sleep," I thought, " I know my duty. I'll take the point of danger." Certainly the men seemed to appreciate it, and we fell into conversation.

" How are things going up here ? "

" Not up to much, sir."

" Anyone been hurt ? '

Digitized by Google

" Ain't heard of any, sir, but it ain't for want of trying."

" This is a pretty bloody place, isn't it ? "

" Yes, sir. How long do you think it'll be before we gets relieved ? "

" Relieved ! Why, we haven't started yet. We may have to go over the plonk in the morning."

Silence. Another shell burst a little farther along.

" Everyone all right ? " I shouted along the trench.

But before any answer came, we heard a low faint cry far down to the right—a blood curdling sound, neither a moan nor a wail, but something between the two, a cry that rose and fell a little for three seconds. Then silence again.

Summoning all my courage, I went out of shelter and moved along to the right. A man crouching under a fallen traverse spoke to me.

" It's How, the policeman, sir, in C company. That last one got him, sir."

" Is anyone looking after him ? "

" Yes, sir, he's with C company. The stretcher-bearers have gone along."

It was no business of mine, I thought, and was turning back when yet another shell came, giving the least of warnings. It burst before us after so short a roar of coming that the brain had no time to appreciate it.

Digitized by Google

"By gad! That's a quick 'un," I said, the beads of perspiration standing on my forehead.

"It's about a twelve-inch, I reckon, sir," said the man; "comes at yer like a whizz-bang too."

"Somebody told me there was a high-velocity gun that fired on this corner. I don't think it's as big as that, though. They do have five-nine high-velocity guns," I said; "it's firing at damned close range anyhow."

I moved about the trench. Only a few more shells came over and those at longer intervals, till at last they ceased for the night. It was cold and damp, so that the men lying in the open, under crazy lean-to's of wood or scooped-out holes in the trench wall, could sleep little. Those in the dugout shaft were dozing uneasily when after an hour or so I decided to go down. I was more than ever jealous and angry with the sleepers below, none the less because I knew the men had noticed it, and were giving me more credit than I deserved for the night watch. I had been longer than any of the others in this company, and the men knew me better than they did Bickersteth. I had no idea of the tactical situation, no conception of our position on the rough sketch that was my only map. Deciding to risk it, I crept down the shaft over the grumbling drowsy forms that filled it, and finding a vacant bed I slept till daylight.

Digitized by Google

§ 3

When I woke the dugout was dark save for a faint light that was thrown down the shaft. There were fewer men asleep on the bunks, and looking round I saw that Bickersteth had gone. I was damnably stiff and dirty, so rolled out of the German blanket that I had slept in and went up into the trench. Dawn was breaking grey and misty; there was no shelling. Bickersteth was bustling about setting the men at work improving their shelters or cooking breakfast over little fires.

"Come on, Edmonds," he shouted with joviality; "what have you been doing? We've been up for ages."

When I protested that I had been out half the night, he failed to be as grateful as I hoped and only asked why. My account of the shelling satisfied him a little. Finding work to do we separated, supervising improvement, reorganising and talking to those men who had been in the worst condition during the night, until there arrived what seemed to me a miraculous meal of tea and bacon.

Afterwards we walked out under cover of the raw fog to look at the situation. The beat of gunfire, so persistent for the last fortnight, was very near, but no shells came our way. Two men came unmolested over the top with petrol

Digitized by Google

tins of water from some water-point. We talked of improvements in the crannies and shelters where many of the company had slept, for Bickersteth thought we might spend some days here.

"Where's this village they talk of?" I asked him. "What's happened to La Boisselle?"

"This is it! Look! I'll show you where we are on the map."

"Then where are the Boches now?" asked I, looking vaguely towards the east. "No wonder we couldn't find the village last night." And indeed the very lines of trees that flanked the road had been blown out of existence. The only landmark was a high rim of white chalk like the crater of a volcano, fifty yards in diameter, just where the road vanished.

"Gad! Look at that mine-crater!" I said.

"Far's I can make out," went on Bickersteth, looking learned over his map, "this is the old German front line in front of La Boisselle. Then that," he pointed to a straggly line of orchard trees half a mile away across a low valley, "must be Ovillers. The Boches are still there. The 17th are in front somewhere in the line. We'll have to go up and attack this long curbed trench on the right of Ovillers. Think I'll go along to Headquarters now and see if there 're any orders. I believe we're attached to the 125th Division."

Digitized by Google

Presently Serjeant Coke, a fair-haired, pleasant-mannered young man, drifted into conversation with me.

" There's a lot of dead Boches along here, sir," he said cheerfully.

This roused my interest, for curiously enough, though I had six months' service in France and had often seen men hit, it had always been in well-ordered trenches, where casualties were soon disposed of ; and I had never seen a corpse.

" Come along, sir," said Serjeant Coke, leading the way over the holes and hummocks of chalk. " When we were up at Messines they lay about thick. I pulled the teeth out of one of them and made a necklace of them. All the chaps used to rummage round them for souvenirs. Careful, sir, look out for this wire ! Lord ! They used to smell in the summer when the flies were bad. Do you know what we are up here for, sir ? "

" No," said I, a little disgusted.

He chattered on in a silky civilised voice. " The chaps are pretty tired, sir. Some of them didn't get any sleep at all last night with the shelling, and then they'd been up since two o'clock yesterday. Captain Mayhew didn't like it a bit. He said C company had touched lucky as usual. They had a man hit in C company."

" Yes," said I, " he was a policeman."

" Look at this, sir ! " gloated Serjeant Coke.

Digitized by Google

'This' was a tangle of rusted brown wire. A framework of stakes and barbed wire of the kind which soldiers call a 'knife-rest.' It had been struck by a sixty-pound trench mortar bomb of which the stem lay close by. In the middle of the tangle, as if the wires had been carefully twisted round it, was a bundle of rags. They were grey and of fine texture, like my own khaki, obviously the ruins of an officer's uniform. It was only when I noticed two smartly booted and gaitered legs in tan leather protruding from one end of the bundle, that I realised it was anything more than rags. No other sign of humanity was visible.

I thought of that smart German subaltern, a man perhaps very like me, crawling carefully over his parapet, as I very often had to crawl over mine, to see how the wire was standing the British drumfire. There was a patch of shadow under the knife-rest where he could lie unobserved. Then the barrage fell in thunders and lightnings. The air was full of reeking smoke and whining fragments of steel. He would try to crawl back as the British bombardment was directed on his belt of wire, but the sixty-pounder fell and killed him in the thicket of iron thorns unseen.

But Serjeant Coke was enjoying himself. "There's some good ones over here," he said, "in the big crater. Come on."

Digitized by Google

I went fascinated.

There were several men standing about making little fires of splintered wood, for the morning was too thick to give the enemy a view of us. Two or three were looking into the mine crater when we reached it. This was not the 'Glory-Hole,' the great crater of La Boisselle, nor yet the equally great one on the Bapaume Road, but a small fifteen-foot hollow among many shell holes. In the bottom of it were lying two curious things. They were muddy grey in colour—clothes and boots and faces. They had features, but features swollen till the skin was stretched tight over their brows and noses and cheek bones. They lay, not in picturesque attitudes, but in the stiff unreal pose of fallen tailor's dummies; they looked less human than waxworks; all the personality had faded from their faces with the life. Big men they had been: they had now a horrid plumpness. In awful fact they were bursting out of their clothes.

I felt neither afraid nor unhappy, but fascinated. These things were less like men than the friendly earth to which they were returning. They were unclean. I returned satisfied; I had seen a corpse.

In the afternoon Richardson was sent by headquarters to make a reconnaissance up the line. I went to sleep. In the evening he returned, tired, confused and sick with the

Digitized by Google

horrors he had seen, grumbling like a volcano about to erupt.

"It's just murder up there. Why, nobody knows anything. There are no signs to direct you in the trenches—nothing. We must have walked miles and miles—and the corpses everywhere, horrible—why they don't have them buried I don't know. Young Anderson was with me, he's a good lad—twenty years younger than me though. Why, let me tell you, down here it's a picnic: the corpses up there by the Ambulance are awful. There's a place where there's a sort of broken-down ambulance wagon. It's a sort of open place. If you can find the way there it makes a good landmark."

He looked at me as if he thought I ought to have been chosen to go. Bickersteth reddened instinctively: he hated to send anyone.

"Pshaw! They're all lost up there," said Richardson. "No one can tell you where the line is, or the bloody square-heads. There's one good thing anyhow; plenty of those dead fellows are square-heads. If I had my way I'd kill 'em all—wounded and prisoners. The only good Boche is a dead one—bloody square-heads, that's what they are."

"Did you get the lie of the land in your mind?" asked Bickersteth anxiously. "There's a trench here—look! I'll show it you—got your map? All right, look at this. Here you are,

Digitized by Google

now. Most likely we're going to attack this curved trench running out from point 66."

"I don't know about that," Richardson continued doggedly, "I can find the way to that broken-down Ambulance. Everyone uses that for a landmark. I couldn't tell where point 66 is. Of course, no one's given me a proper map, they wouldn't. No system—no system at all. And I tell you, you can't find the way about up there. The trenches are all smashed to hell. There's nothing but shell holes and dead men—horrible!"

"Ought to take a compass and map," chirped Bickersteth. "Set your map! Can't go wrong!"

So the day wore on. Richardson grumbled; Bickersteth fussed; Wells sat nervously; I sulked, while the servants produced miraculous meals from nothing in particular.

Next morning the fog held, but the air felt drier. When I went out the guns were cracking and roaring through the mist a mile ahead of us as I had not heard them since July 1st; for though I did not know it, the greatest night attack in the world's history had taken place the night before, and the Fourth Army was beyond Bazentin and Contalmaison, fighting its way into High Wood and Longueval. We were still short of water, which was being brought up by hand in petrol tins, and as I stood and listened to the guns with little Cockburn, the Signalling officer,

Digitized by Google

the colonel's servant came by with a canvas bucket full. We seized on it and washed. It was grey and slimy. The Colonel, the Second in Command, the Adjutant and the Doctor had all been there first, and now Cockburn beat me to it. The bearer and four other headquarters men followed me. No porcelain bathroom, hot-towelled and nickel fitted, ever gave such pleasure.

I went for orders to battalion headquarters. There was a road laid with brushwood fascines above our trench. It was thick with parties of men going up and down. I hardly knew that it was the resuscitated corpse of the Route Nationale Amiens—Albert—Bapaume—Cambrai. It hardly occurred to me that it was our road from Albert. I met Morshead newly come out to the 16th. He was very cheerful and already attached to Brigade as bombing officer. A year later I was to bring him into my trench at Ypres to die.

At headquarters, in another German trench like our own, there were no orders, but magnificent rumours that the cavalry had broken through. I drifted back presently with Heywood, the Adjutant. In our own trench we stood and gossiped. Presently something came towards us with a long, fluttering, whistling sound, like the ghost of a partridge hard hit. It swooped over and fell behind us. Phut!

Digitized by Google

" Dud ! " shouted I in joy. " Ricochet, wasn't it ? "

Heywood was dubious and only looked wise. Then came another sound like it, and another shell fluttered and smashed like a rotten egg somewhere behind. Then came more : they didn't explode ; they smashed, though with a ring of metal in their tone.

Rotten eggs ! No, but there was a smell in the air. It was sweet, pungent, sickly, heavy. Almonds were something like it.

" I think it's gas-shells," said Heywood, grinning.

" Oh Lord," I added without piety.

Flutter, Flutter, Crump ! came the shells. Whirra, Whirra, Phut !

The smell thickened and spread and caught at my throat. My eyes began to stream and my nose ran.

" Damn it, it's making me cry," laughed Heywood.

" We'd better try our gas goggles, hadn't we ? "

" Right."

We put on the goggles, but they were far from gas-tight.

Whirra, Whirra, Whirra, Phut, Phut, Phut ! came the tear-shells thick and fast.

" These damn things wouldn't hurt," chuckled Heywood. " They're too tired."

Whoo—Whoo—Whoo—WHOO—CRASH !

Digitized by Google

It was a big high-velocity shell that burst in front of us, flinging down showers of hot clods of clay.

"Huh, huh, huh, huh," giggled Heywood, his eyes shining with fun; "that's a good 'un, eh, Edmonds?"

I failed to see the joke.

Whirra, Whirra, Phut!

Whoo-o-o—o——CRUMP!

Gas-shells and crumps came over alternately.

"This is no use to me," said I, "I'm going to move."

I moved till the big gun ceased, and returned in an hour to find Heywood and Lance-corporal Barker still crouched in the same place. The former still laughing, the latter looking unhappy.

Gas-shells still fluttered over by ones and twos, and I felt again for my goggles.

"Those goggles are no good," said Heywood.

"Perhaps they're not," said I, hardly convinced. "How'd you get on? Anyone hit?"

"Yes, one feller up there on top. Not of ours. Direct hit on the head, one of those gas-shells. Poor devil!"

After a pause. "And Corporal Barker here. Huh, huh, huh. Gas-shell hit the trench just behind his head! Ha, Ha, Ha! Thought he was dead, but he wasn't touched."

"Yes, sir," said the corporal more cheerfully, "within a foot of me head it was, sir. If it 'ad

Digitized by Google

'a' been a whizz-bang 't 'ad 'a' blown me to pieces. Give me a proper headache it 'as too, sir. Give you my word."

"Better go and lie down, hadn't you, Corporal?"

"Aw, I'll be all right, thank you, sir."

The gas-shells hardly ceased all day. In the afternoon Wells complained that he had no shrapnel helmet. His reward was to be chosen to take all the men in a like predicament up the line to salvage enough of them from corpses. He went against his will and returned in the evening as full of horror as Richardson. I knew, and they knew, that the next horror would be mine.

We were living in the midst of a large population of which we saw little; but now and then a man or two came by, on his way with a message, or to a dressing station, or for water or supplies. That afternoon I was sitting in the dugout shaft when a single man came by, asking for brigade headquarters. He was pale, footsore and unsteady; a German helmet hung from his shoulder-strap; his badges showed him of the 17th battalion.

"How are the 17th getting on?" asked I.

"Cut up, sir; been over the plonk," he said slowly.

"No? What did they attack?"

"They call it Sickle Trench, sir."

Digitized by Google

"Why, that's the one we were going for," said I. "We're in luck."

"We had a real bad time, sir. P'raps you know our colonel, 'e was hit. Went over with the lads 'e did—gloves and stick and all."

"I'm sorry. Did you kill many Boches?"

"Ah, there were a lot of fighting—bombs an' all. Our section was for it. My brother, sir——"

"Hard luck, was he hit badly?"

"He was killed, sir."

"I'm sorry. . . . Can I give you some tea before you go on?"

"Thank you, sir, but I oughter get on with this message. . . . My brother and I have bin together since the division come out."

He shuffled on.

It seemed then that we were to be spared. Our objective had been taken for us. I thought I had already done enough on July 1st. I was to find that we had hardly begun.

§ 4

At 9 p.m. Bickersteth and I were summoned to headquarters and I began to feel afraid again. We were the last to come, and found the C.O. already poring over a map, and talking to the ring of officers clustered round, their faces alone illumined by the light of a candle on the dugout table.

Digitized by Google

" Is that everyone, Heywood ? " asked the C.O.

" Yes, sir."

" Right. We're going to do a little attack to-night. Our objective is the cross-roads behind Ovillers. Better look at it on my map—it's the best. Can you see, Suckling ? Right. We've got to get there at 1 a.m. It'll be difficult. Jumping-off place is a line drawn from point 66 at right angles to the main road." He talked on as quietly as if he were giving operation orders for manœuvres.

I could hardly listen. A tremendous sense of realisation came over me—I hardly know if it were fear or excitement. I knew just what to do. Attacks I was familiar with, but they were attacks over known ground against imaginary enemies. Fighting I knew, but it was fighting dream battles with visionary foes. That had been a favourite game since I had played at ' fighting the Boers ' in the nursery. For the very first time I thought what it meant, to struggle for life with a man of equal wit and training. Not all the strain of six months' trench warfare, of the ordeal of July 1st, of the last two days of preparation, had told me what was the meaning of war, the ' ultima ratio.' In a dream I heard, and in a dream I wrote notes of the plan. The battalion would form here in two waves, would wheel half-left here, would march by this line on the left and would extend and assault here.

Digitized by Google

Our right was guarded by the 17th battalion; from the left the Irish would converge and join us. B company would take the left front.

"What officer are you going to leave behind, Bickersteth?" said the C.O. suddenly.

A wild hope seized me. The second in command was usually left behind. That was myself. Was it a hope or was it a fear? Something in me wished to go with the battalion.

Bickersteth eyed me almost guiltily. "Well, sir," he said slowly, as if it were the basest treachery, "I thought of leaving Richardson behind."

"Good," said the Colonel smartly, "we'll put Edmonds to watch the directing flank."

For a second I was smitten helpless with fear. Then as quickly it vanished, and I found myself, to my own amazement, taking orders in detail as impassively as the Colonel gave them.

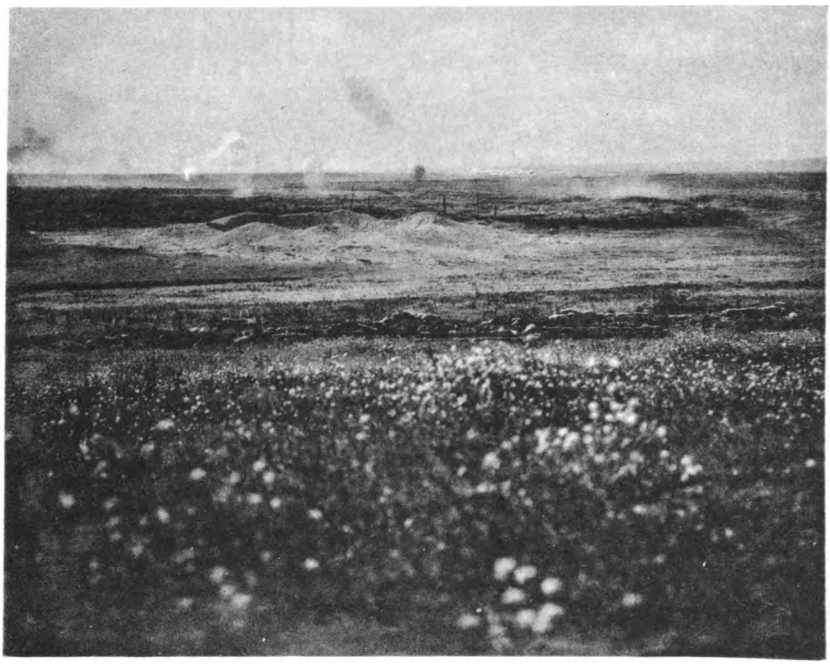
I was to lead the left flank along an old cable-trench. I was to cross the first trench I came to, and take, hold and fortify, with No. 8 Platoon, the trench junction on the cross-roads.

Corporal Turner of C company, with six chosen 'stout fellows,' was attached to me with orders to strafe a suspected machine-gun post which lay on the left outside our area.

Absolute silence was ordered.

The Colonel finished with a stony look. "There

Digitized by Google



LA BOISSELLE UNDER BOMBARDMENT

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

will be no retiring," he said. " On no conditions whatsoever is any man to turn back. Let them all understand that."

I was held back when the others left while the C.O. explained my part in detail, drawing me a little sketch of it.

Then I went back to a hurried supper. Wells and the serjeants were summoned to a meeting and their parts explained. Rations, water, ammunition, rum, were attended to ; the Lewis-guns were brought out and the clumsy ammunition-buckets served out to carriers. Our cook we left behind to preserve our gear, so back he went with the quartermaster-serjeant and the company cooks.

In less than two hours we were on the move. When the time came for the assembly of the companies along the lines of hollows in the chalk, I was surprised how little I felt afraid. One little incident reassured me still more. An N.C.O. came up and said that Private Eliot wished to speak to me. The man was a mere boy, whom I had known in England, and I felt flattered that he should apply to me rather than to Bickersteth for whatever help I could give. I found him crouched against a chalk-heap almost in tears. He looked younger than ever.

" I don't want to go over the plonk," he flung at me in the shamelessness of terror, " I'm only seventeen, I want to go home."

Digitized by Google

The other men standing round avoided my eye and looked rather sympathetic than disgusted.

"Can't help that now, my lad," said I in my martinet voice,[1] "you should have thought of that when you enlisted. Didn't you give your age as nineteen then?"

"Yes, sir. But I'm not, I'm only—well, I'm not quite seventeen really, sir."

"Well, it's too late now," I said, "you'll have to see it through and I'll do what I can for you when we come out." I slapped him on the shoulder. "You go with the others. You'll be all right when you get started. This is the worst part of it—this waiting, and we're none of us enjoying it. Come along, now, jump to it."

And he seemed to take heart again.

This incident served to restore my spirits at least, and I found the numb spot in my midriff almost gone. It was about half-past nine, and I was almost enjoying the feeling of responsibility when the long column began to file over the shell-holes through the dusk.

But that walk became a nightmare. I was at the tail of the company, which moved for hours through broken trenches in single file. Just before me the two Lewis-gun teams stumbled along hopelessly overloaded with guns and clumsy ammunition-buckets, swearing and tripping over broken ground and trailing wires.

[1] I was nineteen years and three months old myself.

Digitized by Google

Presently we climbed out of the trench and hurried over a grassy slope that had been little shelled, where there was a light railway. Now and then we passed salvaged equipment and once or twice a corpse lying sprawled by the way. The battalion was already straggling out in the effort to reach that hopeless rendezvous in time. It became harder and harder to keep up the pace with these tired and heavy-laden men. Then we came out on a road that ran along the top of a spur. The high bank on its further side was honeycombed with little shelters dug in the mud, where snoring figures slept huddled under muddy groundsheets. Though the night was clear there was a suspicion of damp drizzle in the air. I rushed forward to try to halt the front of the column for a moment. Bickersteth was nowhere to be found. I pressed on again, but only at the centre of A company could I find an officer, Evers, a subaltern I knew well. He thought vaguely that the company commanders had gone ahead to find the way. At the head of the battalion there was no officer. I ordered them to halt.

"Where is Captain Suckling?" I whispered angrily, not knowing how near we were to the enemy.

"Gone ahead, sir," said a voice, "told us to follow on, and I think we're lost, sir."

"Hell!" said I. "Haven't they left an officer at the head of the column?"

Digitized by Google

"I dunno, sir," said the voice as if it were quite resigned to its fate and very tired of me. "There's a guide somewheres, sir."

At last I found him, a bewildered private of another regiment, roped in to lead us to Point 66 on the Bapaume Road. He knew nothing: he was waiting for the officer to come back. As we waited for the rear to come up, I asked him about his regiment, and was told a pathetic story of how they had been sent over the top by accident at Contalmaison, and badly cut up because the orderly with the cancelling message never came in time. Then he told me of my cousin in his regiment whom I had not seen since 1914, and how to find his camp at Bécourt.

Finally the situation straightened out and the column moved on. As I dropped back to my place I sent Evers, who was my junior, to take the head of his company with the guide. So the weary march continued through dark winding ways. Climbing over obstacles, squeezing past narrow places, stumbling over fallen wires and *débris*, passing now and again shrouded bundles by the way that sometimes turned with a weary stare or woke with a muttered oath and sometimes lay still with death. At one point we came out on the main road, wide and clear and empty, flanked with shattered trees, and then went down again into the longest trench of all where the few occupants were men of the 17th battalion. Here,

Digitized by Google

though we never knew it, we were right among the enemy and in danger of counter-attack from almost any side. This, Sickle Trench, was a long curving line that led straight out towards Ovillers from the furthest point of our advanced line.

The pace was now quicker than ever; the companies in rear had dropped right out of hearing, and I was feeling desperate, when suddenly I came, round a traverse, face to face with Thorne of D company, who was pushing and lifting the last man before me, gun, ammunition and all, out on to the parapet.

"Hullo, laddie," he said cheerily enough, and I felt among friends again. But before there was time for explanation he hustled me too out into No Man's Land with a clap on the back and his blessing.

I found myself now in a long slope of rough grass, knee high and tangled, in sight, after all, of what looked like the battalion. Here was the serjeant-major, stumping about on his game leg blarneying the sections into place with his stick with all the gestures, if not the noise, of the parade ground. But the men were so tired that I found some, waiting in their places, who had fallen asleep here in No Man's Land. Order came out of chaos and I found my place on the left, and Bickersteth not so flustered as I expected. But then we had a severe blow: the pipe-

Digitized by Google

line[1] which was to guide our left flank was nowhere to be seen. He sent me along the front to Suckling to change the directing flank, and everyone was warned to go by the right. There went one big responsibility from my shoulder. When I got back to the left I looked with my serjeant across the valley and saw a solid shrapnel barrage beating right across our path five or six hundred yards ahead.

We were gloomily discussing this when with a surge on our right the line went forward. We were over the top. We went on in the dark, breaking now and then into the double. The exhilaration of that rush of men was wonderful. The two first waves, barely fifteen yards apart, bunched until the sections were almost shoulder to shoulder. The bayonets gleamed in the flashes of the barrage that crashed in front of us. It seemed unbelievable that this torrent of men could sweep upon the enemy unseen.

Down the hill. On. On.

Not a shot was fired.

Now, where the ground sloped up again, we were thrown into a mass.

Someone cried 'Extend' and the men threw themselves forward, running now over shell-holes ever closer together. I was no more afraid than if it were all a game. Only where the village

[1] The line of a straight ditch dug and filled in again, in which telephone wires were buried for protection.

Digitized by Google

was looming up, a black line of ruins and hedges against the dark sky, I glanced nervously, looking for the opening of that flanking machine-gun fire. Surely they must have seen us.

The ground was now torn and furrowed, ploughed into powdery chaos by the bombardment. A battered trench could only just be distinguished in the general ruin.

We broke into a charge and someone behind me tried to cheer. We silenced him, but still no sign came from the enemy.

Over the empty trench, and on. So much for the first objective.

We struggled over mound and crater of spongy soil and reached the road. No sign from the enemy.

Beyond was a high bank, and over that I could see the Verey lights go up from the next German line. But the road was now a jumbled mass of panting men. Where was my objective? The cross-roads were blasted out of existence. If that flattened ditch over which I had jumped was my trench, then heaven help me when the machine-guns fired down from the village on our left.

"Get your sections in hand," I shout to every N.C.O. I can see, "and keep quiet, for God's sake." Now to find Bickersteth. I rush madly about in the road and find no officer but Wells—vague and flurried.

Digitized by Google

"What are we to do?" whispers he, clutching me.

"Go on!"

"No, we've gone far enough."

"Can't stop here," say I.

Then the expected happens. Crack, crack, crack, goes the Boche machine-gun, shooting uneasily at this noise from a strange direction, shooting wildly, but showing he has heard us.

I think frenziedly. Bickersteth must be hit or lost. Have we gone too far or not far enough? The soldier's motto: "When in doubt go forward." At least we cannot stay here and be shot down in the cutting. In this supreme moment I was inspired. More and more men crowded on to the road, and half a dozen orders and warnings were bandied about. I drew my revolver and scrambled up the bank.

"Come on, lads," I shouted, "over the top."

For one ghastly moment I stood there alone.

It seemed that I was lifted out of myself, and something in me that was cynical and cowardly looked down in a detached way at this capering little figure posing and shouting unrepeatable heroics at the men below.

Through the cracking of the machine-gun, and the banging of the barrage, at last I made myself heard.

"Forward! and we'll have the next trench, too."

Digitized by Google

Then I became aware of a short little fat man standing beside me brandishing a rifle and bayonet.

With a common impulse we turned and ran on towards the enemy.

"Who are you?" I shouted. "I can't see you."

"Don't cher know me, sir?" he said; "I'm the serjeant-major's batman."

"Good man," said I, "I'll remember you for this."

As we raced across the short fifty yards of grass a trickle of men and then a rush followed us over the bank. Before us we felt vaguely that there was commotion in the enemy's trench and the Verey lights went up no more.

We were now in the barrage which had seemed to go before us across the valley. I reached the edge of the trench wondering vaguely what I should do if I found a German bayonet-man poised in it to catch me as I jumped.

But the bay was empty, and I landed on the firm floor of the trench just as a shell burst with a metallic bang ten or fifteen yards on my right.

This was as good fun as playing soldiers in the garden at home.

In a minute there were twenty or thirty men behind me, shouting and laughing as they skylarked round the traverses.

Of course there was no officer or N.C.O.

Digitized by Google

handy. I began to think I was winning the Battle of the Somme alone. Then behind me I noticed the grey head of Corporal Turner, who always reminded me of Baloo in 'The Jungle Book.'

"I've got my six men here," he said rather plaintively. "We can't go for that machine-gun over there, sir. It's miles away. The Colonel told me to stick to you, sir, if we couldn't get at it."

"Good for C company," I shouted, "you're the only section that has stuck together. Take your men down the trench as far as you can to the left and make a bomb-stop and hold that side."

"Right oh, sir," and he went.

Then I rushed along to the right, the way the garrison had retired, but there was no N.C.O. to send to that flank. I put Griffin, an old hand whom I knew to have a head on his shoulders, in charge of two or three men to make another stop by cutting a firing position in a big traverse. Then I went back to my point of entry.

The trench was deep and wide, with sheer sides and a firm floor of clay. The traverses were seven or eight feet high and ten feet thick. The shelling, which gradually slackened, was directed mostly well to the right.

I found Serjeant Broad then, an old ginger-whiskered fellow, who had served in the regular army.

"Well, serjeant," I said, "you are the only

Digitized by Google

one here who has been over the plonk before. What do you think of things ? "

" Well, sir," he answered deferentially, " I think you're doin' very well, sir. But what about these here dugouts ? "

There was a dugout shaft right before us.

" Will I throw a bomb down, sir ? "

" No," said I, feeling full of beans, " I'm going down to have a look. Don't let anyone throw a bomb down after me."

The serjeant didn't approve.

But I called to Lee, a smart-looking lad who was close by, and we started down the shaft. Lee giggled.

" Lee," said I, " have you got an electric torch ? "

" No, sir, but I've got a match somewheres."

So I lit a match and held it well away from me. We crept down the stairway, I with a match and a revolver, he with a bayonet and the giggles.

The dugout opened to the left at the foot of some twenty steps. I slid my revolver muzzle round the corner, gingerly showing the light. Six inches from my hand was the corner of a table on which stood half a loaf of bread, some tinned meat—and there just by my hand an electric torch.

I grabbed it and illuminated the dugout.

Thank God there was no one there. It was

Digitized by Google

bigger, cleaner and more comfortable than the one at La Boisselle, and consisted of a corridor lined with rows of bunks, joining two small square chambers from each of which a shaft led up to the trench.

The walls were all panelled and lined with a double row of bunks, on which lay blankets, ruffled from recent use. A greatcoat or two hung on the walls, and (joy !) there were five 'pickel-haubes'[1] lying about. Evidently the Boches had been surprised and run, leaving food, blankets and equipment behind.

And no wonder, if they had heard the battalion yelling and swarming over their trenches from the rear.

I called down Serjeant Broad for a council of war. He thought the next thing was to get in touch with the battalion again. So we sat down and composed a message with all due military form, saying that we had missed our objective but gone on till we found a very nice deep trench with dugouts, quite beyond any of our instructions, and all we knew about it was that by my compass it faced north-east. I sent off Lance-Corporal Vinter with this message to Bickersteth or the Colonel, or any other senior officer he could find.

We were by this time pretty comfortable and

[1] German full-dress helmets of patent leather with brass badges and spikes, souvenirs very much sought after.

Digitized by Google

altogether pleased with ourselves. The sections were getting together again. I had in the trench with me Wells and about half of the company, a section of A company, and Corporal Turner's party of stalwarts. One of our Lewis-guns had turned up, but only Corporal Matthews and two men with it. The flanking parties had not gone far. They had come to a trench junction on the right and there decided to stop. On the left Turner had come almost at once to a blank wilderness of shell-holes, where our cross-roads must once have been. So we were crowded into this short section, sixty men in as many yards of trench. They had found another dugout on the right, but this I had no time to explore myself.

The night was now far advanced. It was perhaps four o'clock when Bickersteth arrived, full of questions. What was I doing? Why had I overrun my objective? Where on earth had I taken the company off to? We must get ready to go back to our objective. This was our own barrage firing perilously near to our right. He had been left with a Lewis-gun and a handful of men whom he had placed in a shell-hole at the obliterated cross-roads. When he saw the deep trench and the good dugouts, he too wished to stay.

Presently the Colonel came over the top from A company, who had settled in that battered ditch behind the road.

Digitized by Google

"Gone too far, Edmonds," he snapped. "Have to get back to the cross-roads."

"Yes, sir," said I, sorry for the loss of my new playground.

While Bickersteth showed him the good points of the trench, and made a case for staying there, I ran back to the dugout determined at least to find a souvenir. In the shaft I met Wells, and together we seized on the last remaining 'pickelhaube.' We must have been very overwrought, for we stood and wrangled over it, like sparrows over a worm, blocking the trench and holding up the retreat of my little army. In those few moments Bickersteth convinced the C.O. of the position, and we were ordered to stay. In the early morning a staff officer appeared over the top confirming the decision.

So darkness faded into dawn, and dawn into damp and misty daylight.

As it was getting light I happened to be on the right, where Griffin's party was struggling with a huge traverse. A man beyond me said excitedly:

"There's someone coming along the trench. I can hear 'em talking."

"Hurrah," I thought, "this'll be the 17th." So I jumped on to the traverse and shouted "Hullo there! Who the devil are you? Are you the 17th?"

Digitized by Google

Somebody along the trench stopped, and I heard whispering.

"Who are you?" I shouted again, with less confidence.

There was a sound as of someone scuttling up the trench.

"Why, it must have been the jolly old Boches."

We had sent the A company men back and organised our own men with sentries on the flanks and a reserve platoon in the dugout, and were feeling safe and happy, when again I heard something going on on the right.

"Stand to," there was a shout; "they're coming!"

My servant and another man who had been hanging about beyond the sentry-post came flying round the traverse.

"Allemans," they said; "they're coming!"

This was a very different matter from running about in noise and darkness. I suddenly thought of Prussian Guardsmen, burly and brutal, and bursting bombs, and hand-to-hand struggles with cold steel. My first impulse was to tell Bickersteth. It was his responsibility now.

'Thud!' went a loud noise along the trench, and the air shook and whined with flying fragments.

I felt myself turning pale.

I found I was walking slowly away from the danger-point. "I must go and tell Bicker-

Digitized by Google

steth," I excused myself. I passed the word down the dugout. Then I pulled myself together and got up to the front somehow. The men too were very panicky. Poor devils, they hadn't had a good sleep or a square meal for three days.

'Thud' went a bomb three bays up the trench. I licked my lips and felt for my revolver.

'Thud' went a bomb two bays away.

"Come along, let's get back to the bomb-stop," said I not very bravely. We were at a traverse two bays further on where there was a sentry-post. Just then round the traverse from the dugout came Serjeant Adams, an old volunteer of many years' service in England. He was smoking a pipe and had a thin smile on his face.

"What's that, sir," he said pleasantly, "go back? No, sir, let's go forward," and he tucked his rifle under his arm and strolled along the trench alone—still smiling. A bomb burst in the bay beyond him. He climbed the traverse and took a snapshot with his rifle at some person beyond. A group of men stood wavering, and then I went and took my place beside him on the traverse.

Thirty or forty yards away I saw a hand and a grey sleeve come up out of the trench and throw a cylinder on the end of a wooden rod. It turned over and over in the air and seemed to take hours to approach. It fell just at the foot of the

Digitized by Google

traverse where we stood, and burst with a shattering shock.

" The next one will get us," I thought.

Serjeant Adams pulled a bomb out of his pocket and threw it. I did the same, and immediately felt better. A young Lance-Corporal, Houghton, did the same. The next German bomb fell short. Then someone threw without remembering to pull the pin, and in a moment the bomb was caught up and thrown back at us by the enemy.

I snapped off my revolver once or twice at glimpses of the enemy. A little of last night's feeling was returning. Adams and Houghton had gone forward now, and I was just watching them over the traverse, when I had the impression that someone was throwing stones. Suddenly I saw lying in the middle of the trench a small black object, about the shape and size of a large duck's egg. There was a red band round it and a tube fixed in one end of it.

In a flash I guessed it must be some new sort of bomb.[1]

It was lying less than a yard from my foot ; I was right in the corner of the trench. What was I to do ? In an instant of time I thought : Had

[1] This is, I believe, the first recorded use in action of the German egg-bomb which could be thrown to a greater distance than their ordinary stick-bomb. It was, however, far less dangerous when it exploded.

Digitized by Google

I the nerve to pick it up and throw it away? Should I step over it and run? Or stay where I was? There was no room to lie down. But too late. The bomb burst with a roar at my feet. My eyes and nose were full of dust and pungent fumes. Not knowing if I was wounded or not, I found myself stumbling down the trench with a group of groaning men. One man, Allen, was swearing and shouting in a high-pitched voice and bleeding in the leg. All the nerve was blasted out of us.

I fetched up almost in tears, shaken out of my senses, at Bickersteth's feet. My clothes were a little torn and my hand was bleeding, but that was all.

Bickersteth was very cool. He was watching the fight through a periscope and organising relays of bomb carriers.

"You must get these men together, Edmonds," he was saying, "and make a counter-attack."

"I'm damned if I will," said I; "I'm done for," and I lay and panted.

He looked at me and saw I was useless. I hadn't an ounce of grit left in me.

It was Wells who collected the remnants and went up again to find my revolver, "shamefully cast away in the presence of the enemy," and Serjeant Adams still holding his own.

"Come along, Edmonds," said Bickersteth, and I came.

Digitized by Google

In a minute or two I felt better and went up. We got the Lewis-gun out and the whole party moved forward. Houghton was throwing well. We rushed a bay, and Houghton, who was leading, found himself face to face with a German unter-offizier, the length of the next bay between them. He threw a lucky bomb which burst right in the German's face.[1] Their leader fallen, the heart went out of the enemy's attack. At the same moment there were two diversions. An 8-inch shell, one of those which had been falling occasionally on our right, suddenly landed right in the bay behind the German bomber, and his supporters fled. So ended their attack.

But as we moved forward a sniper fired almost from behind us. I felt the bullet crack in my ear, and Corporal Matthews, who was walking beside me, preoccupied and intent, fell dead in the twinkling of an eye. I was looking straight at him as the bullet struck him and was profoundly affected by the remembrance of his face, though at the time I hardly thought of it. He was alive, and then he was dead, and there was nothing human left in him. He fell with a neat

[1] I don't know how a Mills bomb could do this, but I saw it happen. Lance-Corporal Houghton knew nothing of the technique of bombing, and failed in the simple bomb-throwing tests out of the line. He probably let the lever fly, out of ignorance, and held the bomb. He was killed in our next battle.

Digitized by Google

round hole in his forehead and the back of his head blown out.

Other big shells followed the first, so we decided not to hold that part of the trench. We propped up the dead Boche as a warning to his friends against the furthest traverse, and set to work on a better bomb-stop behind, just where Corporal Matthews was hit.

§ 5

It was now clear that we must set a definite limit to our fortress and make a strong bomb-stop on this most dangerous flank. The casual shelling seemed to have settled down into a regular slow bombardment of our extreme right with 8-inch shells, which fell at two-minute intervals just where we had killed the German N.C.O. Bickersteth decided to abandon the right-hand bay, even though it had a good dug-out, and to concentrate on the three bays below my earliest limit. Where I had set Griffin to work on a bomb-stop, he set about a larger and sounder plan. We must level one traverse flat and have a field of fire longer than the range of the German stick-bomb. He organised the work and left me in charge. We started to dig away the ten-foot cube of clay constituting the traverse by which Corporal Matthews had been shot. Almost as we approached and cut into it with pickaxes, the same sniper fired again from the

Digitized by Google

village on our left, and a man called Pratt dropped like a stone just where the corporal had fallen. He, too, had a small round hole in his temple and the back of his skull blown away.

No one seemed very anxious to take his place on the bomb-stop. The body was moved down the trench and we stood around cutting gingerly into the pile of earth. I myself stood opposite the parapet gap through which the sniper fired and took care not to expose myself too much. We seemed to do very little good.

" Aw, give me that pick ! Let me get at it ! " suddenly roared one man, and he sprang up the traverse all exposed, striking giant blows that loosened the top of the mound where no one had dared to work. It was Jimmy Mills, and his time was short : for fifteen seconds, perhaps, he panted and drove his pick mightily, loosening the stiff clay, before the sniper fired again. Mills flung wide his pick and collapsed with a loud cry, inarticulate with rage and pain. The bullet had struck him in the left hip and pierced his bowels from side to side, emerging from the right.

" That's a third man dead," thought I. There were now two men dying on the trench floor, Pratt beating with helpless hands on the earth, the blood gushing from his nostrils, and now Mills, the old soldier, conscious and groaning, his trousers soaked with blood, thrilled with agony by every touch, by every movement. The

Digitized by Google

other men, wounded earlier in the counter-attack, had been taken down into the dugout. These two more I brought to die in comfort in the deep safe fire-bay above it. Pratt was hopeless. Hit in the same place as Corporal Matthews, his head was shattered: spatterings of brain lay in the pool of blood under him; but, though he had never been conscious since the shot was fired, he refused to die. Old Corporal Welch looked after him, held his body and arms, which writhed and fought feebly as he lay. It was over two hours before he died, hours of July sunshine in a crowded space where perhaps a dozen men sat in a ditch ten yards long and five feet wide, reeking with the smell of blood, while all the time, above the soothing voice of the corporal, a gurgling and a moaning came from his lips, now high and liquid, now low and dry—a 'death-rattle' fit for the most bloodthirsty of novelists.

Old Mills, tough, bronzed, ginger-moustached and forty-one years old, lay beside this text 'that taught the rustic moralist to die.' No stretcher-bearers had come on with my wild adventure last night, but the old soldiers thought it best to leave him roughly bandaged until the inward wounds should close. Then he might have a chance. He was little, but hardened by fourteen years' soldiering and two previous wars. His work had not been in vain. The men at

Digitized by Google

the traverse would be fully occupied in digging away the soil which he had loosened till dark, when someone could climb on top again.

The day wore on. No more Germans came, but squalls of shrapnel swept the valley behind us, and bombs thudded in the rear where we thought A company should be. I got some sleep in the afternoon. There was no bunk empty, but I flung myself on a stretcher by the side of Lee, my fellow-explorer of last night, and rested democratically.

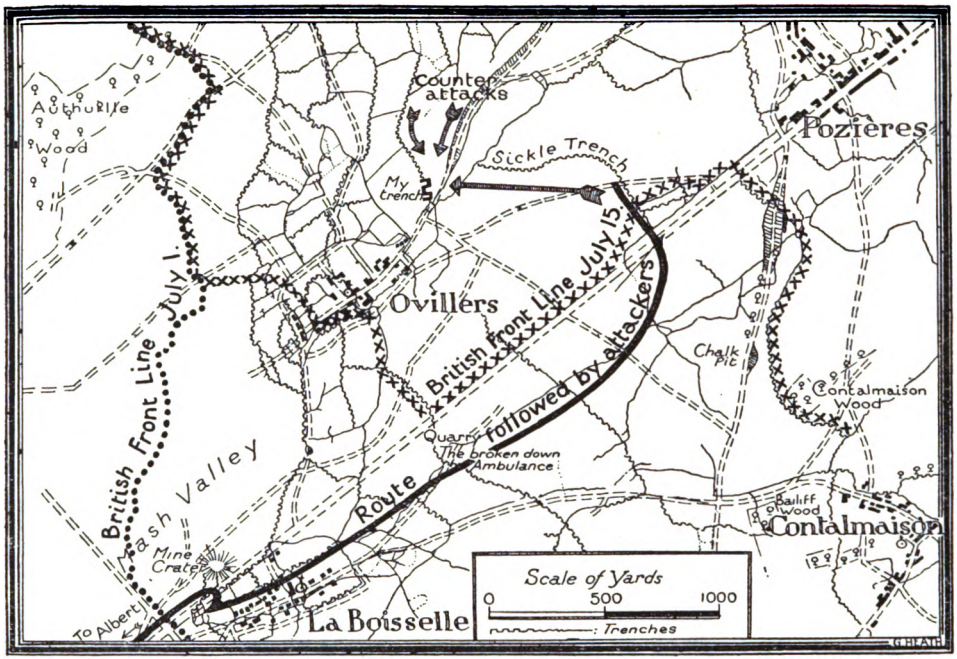
That evening I began to understand our predicament. We had no good map, but Bickersteth made our situation clear. The village of Ovillers had been twice attacked from in front and twice successfully defended by the Prussian Guard. Further to the south at La Boisselle the British had advanced and driven the Germans back, which made it possible to take Ovillers in the flank. We had done more than this. We had advanced and placed ourselves in a trench behind the German stronghold, cutting it off from support and almost surrounding it; but at the same time we had now isolated ourselves, with Germans in front of us and behind us, the garrison of Ovillers in front, and those who were trying to relieve it behind. Consequently we were exposed to fire from almost any direction. On the other hand, to look for help we must turn back across the 1,000 yards of rough grass,

Digitized by Google

impassable by day, which we had rushed across by night. This was actually looking for help in the direction of Germany. Bickersteth surprised me with the news that the heavy gun which persistently dropped shells near our right flank was an English gun, ignorantly trying to protect us, not a German gun ignorantly trying to destroy us. We had to be thankful for this protective fire, though the shell-splinters fell unpleasantly close. Since I had advanced too far in the night attack I had run into our own artillery fire, and the gunners still did not know exactly where we were.

We had little more cause for worry that day. The long silence came to Pratt at last; Mills, game and grumbling, got a little maudlin and was less in pain. We all began to suffer from thirst. Our water bottles, of course, had been filled at starting; but fighting is dry work. It was a muggy day and fear parches the throat. Most of us managed to hoard a few drops of water in case the ration-parties should not reach us early in the night. Work went on well at the bomb-stop, but the thousand cubic feet of clay were not easy to move. Before dark the Lewis-gun mounted on the next traverse could see at least the head and shoulders of a man two bays away. But now I found that the gun team had dispersed and only Bailey and Robinson, two good gunners, were with us. Bailey,

Digitized by Google



OVILLERS AND LA BOISSELLE, JULY 5TH, 1916.

Digitized by Google

who eventually became a serjeant, was a pale, square-jawed boy, whose firm mouth had impressed me as he stood to his gun during the attack. I always preferred the steadiness of the man who was afraid and yet carried on, to the lack of perspicacity that was the secret of most 'brave' men's firmness. 'Granny' Robinson, was a thin, spectacled young man, a very devoted husband with the manners of a gentleman. He was a Salvationist and the only 'pious' soldier I ever met. Two of the best men in the trench, these two manned the gun in turn.

Nerves were tense that evening. The slight bomb casualties had one end of the dugout, where they lay uneasily under charge of one Walton, whom we made a stretcher-bearer for the day; and good work he did. It always recurs to me that as we sat in the dugout, the wounded stirring uneasily, the officers feigning stolidity, a mat of men sleeping thick on bunks and floor, in the dusk of this rat-hole, Corporal Moyle, a loud-mouthed Sam Weller in khaki, broke into song with a Latin hymn to the Virgin, while the dugout listened in astonished silence.

With dusk came a renewal of activities. We arranged reliefs from the dugout and put new life into the work on the bomb-stop.

But a shower of rain, darkness, the flash of explosions before and behind, and the uncertainty of night, made strained nerves even less reliable.

Digitized by Google

There was a disposition to panic. Every time I dozed off, when I was below, I was roused in a few moments by the hoarse staccato whisper down the shaft :

" Stand to ! They're coming ! "

No need to ask who was coming. Up the steps we ran, heart in mouth and weapons in hand, time after time, to find that a sentry had mistaken bursting shells for another bombing attack, or that a party of men was approaching from the other companies, for under the cloak of darkness we had regained touch with the world.

" Stand to, sir, they're coming ! "

No ! This time it is a thrice welcome ration party, with jars of rum and bully and biscuit for to-morrow.

" But water ? " we ask, " where is the water, man ? "

" Coming, sir, the serjeant-major is bringing it, and bombs and ammunition."

So to sleep again.

" Stand to ! They're coming ! "

Again I fling myself up the shaft, for it is death to be trapped in the cellars by an enemy with bombs on the surface.

" Who the hell are you ? " the sentry gasps, his finger on the trigger, and his aim on an approaching shadow.

" All right, my man," says the Colonel's well-known voice, low and firm, but a little petulant.

Digitized by Google

"Hullo! There's Edmonds! How are you getting on?"

"Not so badly, sir, but I'd give my next leave for a whisky and soda."

"Done!" says the Colonel, groping in his side pocket, and producing a Perrier bottle which he hands to me. "Your next leave is mine, Edmonds."

He had taken the precaution to bring a pint of that mixture with him over the top.

The little joke and the spirits restore my nerve and I feel ten times more confident that the Colonel should merely be in the trench with us.

"They've had a bad time back there," he tells me.

It had not occurred to me that any but we had had bad, let alone worse, times.

"Suckling's gone, and Mayhew too, I'm afraid. They've been bombing all day." He doesn't mention that he, the Colonel, has been in the thick of it where Colonels have no right to be.

"How's Evers, sir?" I burst in.

"I think he's killed too," says the Colonel absently. "A company have no trench at all: it's all destroyed. I've withdrawn most of them. And the 16th are relieving to-night."

"What about us, sir? Will they relieve us?"

"I don't think they'll be able to come up to-night. But you're all right here. This is a good

Digitized by Google

trench—good dugouts. I wish I'd stayed here last night."

Presently comes the panic-stricken whisper again.

" Stand to ! Stand to ! They're coming again ! "

" What is it ? What is it ? " asks the Colonel. " Damn them ! They're all alike. Half-gotten weaklings. What's this panic about ? " He gives orders. " This nonsense must stop. We must have some sleep down here. Edmonds, don't let them disturb me and Captain Bickersteth. Oh Lord, what's this ? " Unknowingly in the dark he has stepped on Mills, who gives a loud groan.

" Wounded man, sir," say I, " name's Mills."

" Well, get him out of the way, Edmonds. Are you badly hurt, Mills ? I'm sorry, but they shouldn't have put you here."

" Oh, it's awright, sir. I'm done for. Fourteen years' soldierin' and they got me this time. Wasn't you as hurt me, sir. Back seems all numb, sir. Can't get warm." He maunders on as the Colonel moves away.

" Put a stout fellah on the top here as sentry, and then get some sleep yourself."

I can never reproduce on paper all that it meant to me to have the Colonel with us in the trench. He was my hero. I admired his clothes and his horsemanship and his incisive speech

Digitized by Google

and the adventures he had had in Africa, and his masterly way of handling troublesome superior officers; and I would yet think as highly of him again when I heard of his doings a few hours previously in the next trench, when the Germans attacked C company with bombs and all the officers were hit. Bickersteth had been as steady as a rock when I gave way; his calmness had held the trench, but now things were different. Now Cæsar had snatched up a shield and stood in the ranks of the Tenth Legion. Now the Little Corporal stood to a gun on the bridge of Arcola.

Calm was restored and we had no more alarms. The night of terror ended soon, but the cry, 'Stand to! They're coming!' and the stumbling climb in the darkness have not ceased to haunt my dreams.

No relieving company came that night, and at dawn we resigned ourselves to another day of misery and probably heavier attacks. I caught myself at one moment even discussing with a serjeant whether we could hold out against an 'over the top' attack, and whether we should be justified even in surrendering if a large force rushed us. But that thought I managed to suppress.

We were certainly beginning to suffer badly from thirst. No water party ever arrived. The night before I had gone to the corpses to take their water-bottles for the wounded, but some-

Digitized by Google

one else had forestalled me and emptied them. Thirty-six hours ago we had each started with a quart in our bottles, but we had never expected to be left so long. Those men whose water was only finished this morning felt that they had been sufficiently cautious. Well, it was daylight now, and no considerable help could be expected till the darkness came again.

There were plenty of small things to be done. We were still struggling to move the mountain of traverse and felt tolerably secure. I found a kind of repeating German rifle which the Colonel mounted in reserve to the Lewis-gun on the bomb-stop. Then the dugout sentry, looking over the top, saw Germans moving in a trench on the skyline near the sniper's post. We decided to watch them and not fire, to the Colonel's disgust when we reported. It seemed to be a relief moving away towards Thiepval. Then further to the left I clearly saw a man with a white flag standing and signalling from a hedge near the entrance to the village. We saved this man from being shot by zealots and found a signaller of sorts who read the message, which was in Morse code, while I wrote it down. But nothing could be done with it; there only came a code [1] word of some kind repeated again and again, an arrangement of letters meaningless in any language we knew. I wandered up the

[1] Isetmhseetsee isaetie ngend.

Digitized by Google

trench and noticed Eliot, the boy who had wanted to stay behind. He was sitting on the fire-step joking with his neighbour, with his fears forgotten. He agreed with me that things weren't so bad, after all.

Presently an aeroplane flew low over us and we waved, hoping to give him our exact position, for the shells were still falling too close on our right. I conceived the mad plan of heliographing to him with a periscope mirror, a plan which hardly succeeded. Yet though the shells were falling so close that Hudson, an old Lancashire man, was hit in the leg by a spent splinter, of which he took no notice, continuing to sing lugubriously :

> " 'A love the ladies,
> 'A love to be among the girls " ;

and though at one time we abandoned the farthest sentry-post beyond the bomb-stop, during the course of the day the shelling slackened and ceased. We learnt afterwards that Cockburn, the Signalling officer, had seen the Germans massing to counter-attack our flank and had rung through to a battery ordering fire on his own responsibility and turned the scale in our bombing fight. Later from his observation post he had seen another counter-attack assembling and brought the artillery to disperse them before they had approached us. It was his barrage

Digitized by Google

OVILLERS: A CAPTURED GERMAN TRENCH

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

that had kept us safe, even if it was itself a slight danger.

I spent some time walking about the trench talking to different men. They were thirsty and tired but in wonderful spirits and ready for another fight. We improved the trench and rigged up a latrine in one corner of a bay. I brought out my reserve packet of De Reszkes and passed them round, duly receiving gratitude, though Woodbines would have been more popular. Some men grumbled at there being no rum ration, but we had decided that it would increase thirst.

Stanley, my servant, drew me into conversation out beyond our right flank now that the shelling had lifted. We looked at the dead ' unteroffizier ' and into the shaft of the abandoned dugout, of which I was rather frightened, for one shaft of it rose in another trench which joined ours farther along. He told me that he had been inside the dugout when yesterday's counter-attack began, and had run up the shaft, heavy-eyed, to find a huge Boche towering over him with upraised bomb. I asked him what he did. Stanley replied :

" I put me skates on." Probably the Boche did likewise.

Reader, before you condemn Stanley as a coward (for he was one of the bravest men I have known) reflect what you would do, if half-

Digitized by Google

awake and half-asleep you were confronted with a man twice your size and a weapon that could blow seven men like you to rags in an instant. When two enemies meet in war, each surprising the other, they generally both dodge back into cover and devise a plan.

But Stanley soon came to the point. Furtively he produced a water-bottle, nearly half-full, and thrust it into my hands.

"Take it, sir," he said. "I've saved all this. I had plenty."

"Stanley, you're a sportsman, but I can't take it off you. I've drunk up all my own."

"You'd better have it, sir."

"If you're sure you can spare some, give it to the wounded. They're wanting it pretty badly."

He did so, but looked disappointed about it.

That incident helped me. Water for the wounded was getting a serious problem, so we decided to send a message across. A man volunteered at once to take it over the top to A company. Lance-Corporal Vinter went to show him the way out of the trench, but the man had hardly got clear when he was shot dead. In a few minutes Vinter and Corporal Goodbody came to me and offered to try again. They went out carefully and dashed over the bank safely to the trench in the rear, where the 16th had taken the place of A company. Only a bottle or two of water could be spared, for the present.

Digitized by Google

It was another muggy grey day, and steadily growing drier and thirstier.

A buzz of excitement down on the left brought me there again to find the sentry and others exposing themselves over the parapet. They could see Germans surrendering—hundreds of them—to somebody on our left. Later we learnt they were the last 120 men of the garrison of Ovillers, the 3rd Prussian Guard, the 'Cockchafers,' two days cut off from supplies by us who were planted in their rear. The others had retired towards Mouquet Farm and Thiepval through the trench where we had seen them on the skyline.

The success of Corporal Vinter and the combined effects of thirst and boredom produced several volunteers to go and fetch water. Bickersteth would not let me go. A tall, thin, raw-boned man made the next trip, with a tactical report from the Colonel. This runner came back safe and panting, and inspired several more. But water was scarce in the trench behind as well as in ours.

Towards noon, old Mills, lying on the firestep, groaning only when jolted unavoidably in the narrow way, began to give up hope. He thought he was dying and turned sentimental. Plucking feebly at my arm as I passed, he tried to give me his blessing. I was a fine young gentleman, and had always been a good officer

Digitized by Google

to him, and if it hadn't been for me they would have all been done for. I was most embarrassed and only with difficulty told him not to talk like that, for he was good for another fourteen years' soldiering. Neither of us believed what I was saying. I quieted him at last with a dash of brandy from my flask, for which the doctor cursed me handsomely later, for it might have killed him instead of sending him to sleep. One of the wounded men below lost his nerve a little and moaned for water, till we thought we had better send another volunteer. Yates, a surly, unsociable man, offered to go. He took several water-bottles and came back with enough for the wounded, making a second journey safely with a companion.

The wounded were now satisfied, but most of the trench licked their dry lips and prayed for nightfall, still many hours away. It was specially aggravating to possess those two jars of useless rum, all of which we would have willingly exchanged for half a gallon of water.

Looking up from the dugout mouth in the sullen dry mid-afternoon, I suddenly saw a man strolling over the top towards us, though we had no volunteers at work just then. Soon I saw the 16th badge on his arm.

"Come down!" said I, "jump to it! They're sniping like the devil across here!"

"I'm all right, sir," said he, looking round

Digitized by Google

casually enough, and indeed no shot had been fired at him.

" What have you come for ? "

" Captain Moore sent me to find out where you were."

" Well, you're the first man who's come over without being fired at. Come down the dugout. The Colonel will see you."

He sat on the dugout steps and told the Colonel what he knew, which was not much. We gave him some rum and sent him back with a message reporting more movement in that skyline trench.

The Colonel had been feeling uneasy all day about the situation, thinking that we were not controlling our own destinies enough. We looked over the tactical position. On the right I showed him the dugout which opened into the other trench. Flaring up with interest at once, he began to threaten me with all kinds of horrors, fighting patrols, general advances till we met resistance, extensions of the position to the right. It seemed to me that we had already bitten off as much as we could chew. But inaction never suited him. Before long I found myself under orders, with Corporal Houghton and any men I wanted, to explore the loop trench leading round the dugout. If we met no enemy we should have plenty of fun with our own barrage. Pleased to be singled out for the Colonel's confidence, and chosen without question before Wells, who had

Digitized by Google

all along been in the background, I hardly remembered to be afraid. So the Corporal and I decided to start alone and work round from the left.

Corporal Houghton stripped off his equipment, put a bomb in each pocket and stood ready with another in his hand. I drew my revolver and felt confident again, finding moral support in being the chosen one again, to stand in the limelight at the post of danger. I slid gently over the shoulder-high bomb-stop on the left, keeping low to escape my old friend, the sniper. The corporal following, I crept along the trench. One bay we had to pass, and one ruined traverse, till where the trench faded out of existence among the shell-holes the switch trench should turn off to the right. The parapet was low and made me stoop. I went stealthily round the traverse and poked the muzzle of my revolver into the meditations of a British subaltern who was sitting quietly on the fire-step playing with the pin of a bomb.

"Good Lord!" I said, leaning against the traverse. I saw by his badges he was of the 16th. "How did you get here?"

"All the battalion's here. Boches have evacuated the village. Our men are right ahead there, look!"

Now I could see men in khaki moving across the low ground on the left and the figures in the

Digitized by Google

skyline trench were now revealed as Englishmen too.

"Have you got any water?" said I.

"Sure." He gave up his water-bottle, which we emptied in a moment. "There's a party coming through with water in a minute."

Before long we were back at the dugout explaining to the Colonel. The subaltern of the 16th, a swarthy young man, rather supercilious and sceptical of our heroisms, was followed by a group of Tommies bringing petrol tins full of water, which we swallowed in huge draughts. It tasted of petrol, but it was damp and cool. After half a pint from the subaltern's bottle, I drank at least a quart from the can, and was thirsty again in a moment. The joy of relief had lifted any fear of present danger, and we all drank and talked and drank again. Everyone was happy but poor old Mills, who was still prevented from disturbing his stomach with more than a little water.

The slope was covered with men. A bombing party pressed on beyond our defences to the right, for the barrage had lifted. Other parties were mopping up the area behind and on the left. One group under Colonel Cornwall, newly commanding his battalion, bombed and surrounded an enemy post right in our rear in the valley. They then came on and established their headquarters in our trench. Colonel Cornwall came

Digitized by Google

up and greeted me with the enthusiasm of a boy who meets a friend at a very exciting football match.

We all found ourselves standing about carelessly on the top, for the snipers were cleared off the Ovillers Crest and we were only visible from the Pozières Ridge far away to the right—not that we cared if we were visible from Berlin. But Pozières was developing troubles of its own. The Australians were going in the line there to attack it, and as we stood and talked, the skyline heaved and smoked, throwing up fountains and jets of soil and grey smoke as if it were a dark grey sea breaking heavily on a reef. The bombardment grew thicker and thicker: sullen clouds of smoke sprang up and drifted across its torn groups of trees; the spurts of high explosive rose close together, till it seemed that the very contour of the hill must be changed.

Our thoughts were recalled two miles by the loud crash of shrapnel bursting almost overhead. A 'mad minute' of black-bursting shells rained from the air and burst above Ovillers. The shrapnel banged like dinner gongs dropped downstairs, and a black pall hung along the ridge. Like so many German shells, they burst too high, and the line of fire threw the danger-zone on to the village two hundred yards away.

The Colonel had gone: Bickersteth now began to get the company away as soon as possible,

Digitized by Google

back to camp on the Albert Road where we had left our packs. The wounded were to be left in charge of the 16th Battalion; we should have a big enough job getting ourselves down the line. I tried to get permission to leave the Lewis-gun ammunition, which had given such trouble in moving forward, as the 16th would have been glad of it, but Bickersteth was most definite; it must be brought, for we were not going right out of the line and should want it again in a day or two. Before we left we buried our dead men in a shell-hole in front of the trench. We made rough wooden crosses to mark the graves, but no one seemed inclined to say a prayer. I was much too shy to suggest it, being only an officer, while the burial was carried out by the friends of the dead men.

§ 6

Then about half-past six Bickersteth led off the long procession in single file down the trench. I brought up the rear and picked up our second Lewis-gun, which had never been with us, but had taken up a position of its own near the cross-roads. Collecting this party we lost touch at once with the company, but the six of us followed on, loaded down with the gun and those accursed magazine buckets. Instead of going back across the valley Bickersteth had led the way direct towards Ovillers into a maze of

Digitized by Google

German trenches at the entrance to the village. We pursued him, with the help of ignorant passers-by. We passed a bomb dump with cases of stick-bombs and egg-bombs, and another kind more like our Mills bombs, but fired by the pulling of a loop (these I never saw in use); then past a series of doorways leading into a large dugout system which I did not then know was the famous trench Dressing-station of Ovillers, capable of holding three hundred lying cases, but lately used as a mortuary and impenetrable. Presently I saw a likely trench cutting across the valley, and having no news of Bickersteth, decided to risk it. I went on in front of the party to pick the way. There was mud in the bottom, though the sides were white chalk, and a few corpses at that repulsive stage when the skin turns slimy black, so I followed the example of the men, climbing out and following the parapet.

It was then, turning back, that I knew what the novelists mean by a 'stricken field.' The western and southern slopes of the village had been comparatively little shelled; that is, a little grass had still room to grow between the shell-holes. The slope was held by tangle after tangle of rusty barbed wire in irregular lines. But among the wire lay rows of khaki figures, as they had fallen to the machine-guns on the crest, thick as the sleepers in the Green Park on a summer Sunday evening. The simile leapt to

Digitized by Google

my mind at once of flies on a fly paper. I did not know then that twice in the fortnight before our flank attack, had a division been hurled at that wire-encircled hill, and twice had it withered away before the hidden machine-guns. The flies were buzzing obscenely over the damp earth; morbid scarlet poppies grew scantily along the white chalk mounds; the air was thick and heavy with rank pungent explosives and the sickly stench of corruption.

We hurried on. As we approached the embanked side of the great road, three or four heavy shells, 8-inch at least, came over and burst at hundred-yard intervals along it. Retaliation was beginning for the continuous punishment of Pozières.

"Come on!" I shouted. "Let's get a move on. This is a bad place to be caught in." I hurried on under a culvert and out again up the next spur. But the men could hurry no more. Worn out when they started, overloaded with these awkward buckets, they could make no better pace through mud and shell-holes and up this rough slope. When we reached the top of the hill, there was no mistake about it. The Germans were barraging the crest with heavies and probably would counter-attack. Here I lost my temper. It was a case of getting my men through or saving this wretched ammunition. We were three-quarters of a mile from the front

Digitized by Google

line. The stuff was safe. I decided to disobey orders. Two gunner officers were watching the artillery duel close by. I set the men to work dumping the stores in a convenient shell-hole and ran back to the gunners. In great haste I committed to their charge one Lewis-gun and I forget how many magazines. One of them was, I believe, a colonel, and looked surprised, but I waited for nothing, and fled, shouting to my men to run down the trench till they got out of the barrage. All this last you must imagine amongst the crash and roar of heavy shells bursting round, several within fifty yards of us. We ran like hell, myself last! Then came an incident which has often given me doubts where my duty lay. Of course my own men had the first call; of course when retreating I was right in bringing up the rear. But as I fled, I noticed a signaller with head-phones on in a 'cubby-hole' dug into the trench-wall. I pulled up short and shouted to him through the thunders, asking where we were, and if the company had passed that way. He made no answer, but slowly raised his head and looked at me with blank appealing eyes. I saw that two rivulets of blood were running slowly from his throat into the collar of his tunic.

Now what was the motive of my action I cannot say. Irritated at receiving no answer, horrified at the unexpected, feeling that I could

Digitized by Google

do no good and that a signaller could not be far from reliefs, I shouted vaguely that I would send him help and ran on after my men. A hundred yards further down the trench and round a bend, I passed a large party from our C company, sheltering from the bombardment in another row of 'cubby-holes.' I only lingered to tell their stretcher-bearers of the bleeding signaller, and rushed on till I caught up my own men. Whether he bled to death before they found him, or whether perhaps he was only scratched and dazed, I never knew: but his face remained with me.

We were through the barrage and my men had halted outside a dugout and were drinking with some charitable riflemen. We were as thirsty again as if we had drunk nothing since yesterday, and emptied all the petrol cans of water they could spare. Then on again down the trench, lighter for the loss of the ammunition, but dog-tired and footsore. We were well below the skyline and a mile or more from the nearest section of the front when we encountered a large party of men from a strange division, without an officer. They were carrying water up the line, unarmed. A stretcher-party converged on us, and fifty yards of trench was jammed with about a hundred men going different ways. Suddenly the shelling broke out again, but not within a furlong of us. It was near enough for

Digitized by Google

some overstrained stretcher-bearer. In a hysterical voice he suddenly shouted.

"Aw! Look! They're comin' over the top!"

In a flash of time the trench was in confusion. My little band of stalwarts was swept away in a rush of panic-stricken stretcher-bearers. Shouting and trampling, the whole hundred men vanished in all directions. It was an amazing example of the madness of an uncontrolled mob. My serjeant was carried right down the trench out of sight. I was rushed a few paces along it, shouting that we were a mile from the enemy. When I looked back I saw to my joy, absurd though it was, Yates and my other men lying up on the parapet loading their rifles and looking for an aim at imaginary foes. The water-carriers vanished utterly; where they ran to I don't know; but at least we had got still another drink from them.

We assembled and trudged on again, round endless traverses, over innumerable obstacles, for the most part through deserts of chalk and wire and sand-bags, but sometimes meeting troglodytes who gave us water, always more petrol-tainted water, and directed us down the line. Once we came into a sort of quarry with dugouts in it and the broken-down ambulance wagon of which Richardson had spoken, and then on again through endless windings of battered trenches.

Digitized by Google

At last we came out into an open valley in the dusk and moved across turf again, but it was turf scored by the hoofs of many mules and worn into ruts by wagon-wheels. Everywhere columns of transport with the night's supplies of food and ammunition were moving up, and batteries were changing position. One had just had a horse killed, had cut it loose and left it there by the track. Asking our way we drifted over a low hill and stumbled somehow into the lines of bivouacs that flanked the road outside Albert. More by luck than by judgment we reached our own officers' lines, to find we had been given up for lost.

They met me as one returned from the dead, where the company messes were dining by candle-light off the ground. I was the hero of the moment; but my glory faded when Bickersteth asked after the Lewis-guns and I told him that they had been abandoned in a shell-hole that I could not locate on the map.

But on the whole we were well received. Two hundred yards from our camp was a six-inch naval gun which fired every few minutes over our heads, not only jarring our nerves but extinguishing every light in the camp at every blast. We slept that night in a closed-in gun-emplacement of earth and hurdles, happily except that Richardson found a snake in his bed.

Digitized by Google

Casualties to the battalion in this battle :

Killed ..	3 officers,	45 other ranks.
Wounded ..	5 officers,	76 other ranks.
Total ..	8	121

One hundred and twenty-nine : that is about a quarter of those who took part in the battle, a small proportion considering the rashness of the enterprise.

[British Official Communiqué—July 17th, 1916, 2.15 p.m.—gave this report : " On our left flank in Ovillers-la-Boisselle where there has been continuous hand to hand fighting since July 7th, we captured the remaining strongholds of the enemy together with 2 officers and 124 guardsmen who formed the remnants of its brave garrison. The whole village is now in our hands.]

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER III

THE MIDDLE YEAR OF THE WAR, 1916–1917

§ 1

WAR is a contest of nerves. That army wins which in times of tribulation can longest bear the mental strain of plague, pestilence and famine; battle, murder and sudden death. In the middle years of the Great War the strain began to tell. Early in 1916 all the European armies were tuned to the highest pitch of mind and body; late in 1917 all were perilously near the breaking point. In 1916 English, French and Germans alike saw victory within their grasp, and expected it after every local advantage; in 1917 the war seemed likely to go on for ever, and victory had receded into a visionary distance. The weakest links in the chain began to give: Russia collapsed; Italy went down but recovered; even France, after bearing the burden and heat of the day, showed signs of weakening: for a time the war was sustained by England and Germany alone: England striking desperate blows, with failing courage, Germany stubbornly resisting without hope. At this moment there was no

Digitized by Google

question of sudden victory, only of prolonging the war until one or other should give up the contest.

The Somme battle raised the morale of the British Army. Although we did not win a decisive victory, there was what matters most, a definite and growing sense of superiority over the enemy, man to man. The attacks in mid-July were more successful and better managed than those of July 1st. In August and September things went better still. When the tanks made their surprising appearance on September 15th rejoicing knew no bounds; but the Germans were not yet badly beaten enough nor our skill great enough for us to make the best use of our winnings, and the autumn rains rendering further movement impossible brought us to a standstill in the mud. My regiment had by no means completed its task at Ovillers. A week after the battle described we went up again to Pozières to carry out a large bombing attack on the left flank of the Australians and lost another fifty men before going out for a fortnight's rest thirty miles away near Abbeville. One of the most cold-blooded processes of war is fattening for the slaughter. Twice already we had gone into the Battle of the Somme to make food for powder, and now a second time were withdrawn for rest and training, and to be made 'up to strength' by drafts of new recruits sent out from England.

Digitized by Google

A disbanded battalion of cyclists from East Anglia gave us one of the best drafts we ever received, sufficient in numbers for us to be able to undertake a third tour in the battle late in August. Near Thiepval the brigade went over the top behind a ' creeping barrage ' of shrapnel, a device newly invented, which threw into our hands a strong German trench redoubt with two hundred and fifty prisoners—one of the neatest battles of the war, and one highly commended by the authorities above, even by our masters, the Daily Papers. In this affair Bickersteth and the company behaved brilliantly. I did nothing, being in reserve until the next day, when under his orders I carried out a small bombing attack against an outlying German trench, which just enabled me to claim a share in the battle. For some days more we held Skyline Trench, a waste of shell-holes always under fire, where the shape of the ground suffered continual change from the effects of bombardment, and one always lost one's way. Then my regiment's part in the Battle of the Somme was over; but I had another allegiance to consider. To my family; to my parents living abroad, to my brothers and sisters in France and elsewhere, the Somme battle came to have a different meaning when in October one of my brothers was killed.

We spent most of the autumn out in rest,

Digitized by Google

marching and drilling among familiar villages, enlivened by alarums and excursions towards the battle-field. Having got through three of the worst phases of the 'Great Push' with credit and without disaster, we gave ourselves airs as veteran soldiers. There was a regrettable tendency to 'buck' about one's battles all day long, to swap experiences with other soldiers and to 'tell the tale' to newcomers. We were quite sure that we had got the Germans beat: next spring we would deliver the knock-out blow. Much was to be endured before that day should come. In November the division was sent up again to the Somme to a point pushed far forward into the German lines. Stumbling across miles of old battlefield, first through horse-lines and dumps, then through lines of guns concealed in mud-holes, then through dreary wastes of clay pitted with shell-holes full of mud, strewn with a litter of old equipment and shell-splinters, and smelling vilely of six-months' old corpses, one came to a wide swampy valley commanded on this side by the Pozières ridge which we held, and on the other by Loupart Wood which screened the German guns and the distant towers of Bapaume. Down in the bottom, in the central middle distance, there rose out of the mud a strange conical mound of white chalk, a hundred feet high. What Gallic chieftain slain by Cæsar in the land of the Ambiani lay beneath

Digitized by Google

this tumulus we cared not. It was known as the Butte of Warlencourt (which we pronounced exactly as in English) and marked the German front line. While the artillery of the two armies lay back on the hill tops strafing anyone who moved by day down the long slopes to the Butte, the infantry crouched and hid in the mud of the valley bottom. Even by night one could scarcely move, for the enemy spasmodically plastered with shell-fire every line of approach. To go or come from the line was a nightmare adventure and, once there, one dared not move for fear of the enemy machine-guns on the Butte of Warlencourt. That ghastly hill, never free from the smoke of bursting shells, became fabulous. It shone white in the night and seemed to leer at you like an ogre in a fairy tale. It loomed up unexpectedly, peering into trenches where you thought yourself safe: it haunted your dreams. Twenty-four hours in the trenches before the Butte finished a man off. In the severe winter[1] that was setting in, no precautions could prevent men going sick from frostbite and fevers; and no one was in good health. The worst disease of that winter was 'Trench feet' a sort of foot-rot caused by standing with one's feet continually wet and

[1] Excepting 1928–29 the winter of 1916–17 was the coldest of this century.

Digitized by Google

cold. At best it was extremely painful, and at worst it required the amputation of the patient's feet.

In these wretched surroundings we found one solace. We used to sit in the dugout and sing; music-hall songs and folk-songs, and the ribald old army songs which have been handed down by ten generations of soldiers from mouth to mouth. Being young and strong, I stood the physical conditions pretty well, and generally recovered from the effects of trench life after a night's sleep. On the other hand, the shell-fire began to tell on me. The terrors of battle added to the hardships of arctic exploration were overwhelming, and after three tours in front of the Butte I was a nervous wreck. Nor, I suppose, was I alone in this, as one-third of the whole division went sick, and on their side of the line the Germans were in just the same plight.

We spent Christmas out in rest at Albert, a market town of some size still containing a few civilian inhabitants. This was a very happy time. My brother sent me the 'Ghost Stories of an Antiquary' which frightened me so much that I shivered alone in my billet at night. I had now been a year at the front, and began to make up a diary of my experiences. It may be interesting to the reader to hear how a subaltern at the war had actually passed his time.

Digitized by Google

§ 2

ANALYSIS OF A DIARY KEPT AT THE FRONT DURING THE YEAR 1916

It is not easy to divide a year of war into so many days 'up the line' and so many 'down the line' because one was very often not quite one thing or the other. Actually in the front-line trench there were very few men at any given moment, because in war every unit tries to withdraw some small proportion of men into reserve. For example, an infantry division of 20,000 men holding a sector of the front might have two of its three brigades 'up' and one in reserve. In the same way each forward brigade might have two of its four battalions 'up' and two in reserve; and each of the two battalions would try to keep two of its four companies in reserve. This means that on the divisional front of three or four miles, eight companies at a time might be sufficient to hold the front line, 1,000 men out of the 20,000 that made a division. The men that the battalion kept in reserve would probably be near enough to be continually under fire and on the alert. They would hardly dare to lay aside their arms, clothes or gas-masks, and in some trenches they led a more disturbed and dangerous life than the men in the front line. On the other hand, in quiet trenches they might enjoy a holiday punctuated only by

Digitized by Google

occasional visits to the front line to help with the endless digging. To be in reserve, then, may mean being near the front in reserve to a battalion, or to a brigade and a little farther back, or to the division, which meant ease and safety. Finally, the whole division once or twice a year would be withdrawn from the line for rest and training.

I find that in the year 1916 I spent 65 days in the front-line trenches, and 36 more in supporting positions close at hand; that is, 101 days which may be described as under fire. In addition 120 days were spent in reserve positions near enough to the line to march up for the day when work or fighting demanded, and 73 days were spent out in rest. This leaves 72 days for various contingencies. Twenty-one days were spent at schools of instruction; 10 in hospital, with German measles, of all humiliating diseases for a soldier; 17 days on two short visits to England on leave (I got leave about once in six months throughout the war; a private soldier got much less); 9 days at the Base camp on my way to join the regiment; and the remaining 14 days in travelling from one of these places to another. On active service one is never long in one place but continually packing up and marching a few miles with apparent aimlessness, explained only by the intricate staff plans for concentrating troops where they will be required. In 1916 I packed up all my goods

Digitized by Google

and moved about eighty times, of which fourteen were by train or bus and the rest on my own feet.

The 101 days under fire contain twelve ' tours ' in the trenches, varying in length from one to thirteen days. The battalion made sixteen in all during the year, but I missed two on leave, one in hospital and one ' on a course ' ; all four being ' cushy ' tours. We were in action four times during my twelve tours in the trenches. Once I took part in a direct attack, twice in bombing actions, and once we held the front line from which other troops advanced. I also took part in an unsuccessful trench-raid. On six other occasions I had to go up the line either for working parties or to reconnoitre.

This must be a typical experience shared by many hundreds of thousands of infantrymen who spent a year continuously at the front during the middle period of the war.

§ 3

At the end of January 1917 the division moved south to take over trenches from the French on the banks of the river Somme, which wound through the battle line in sinuous curves. It is a sluggish swampy stream not unlike the Thames above Oxford, splitting into numerous channels which flow round osier beds and water meadows and market gardens, between low chalk downs.

Digitized by Google

In war it forms a military obstacle impassable to troops except at rare bridges ; and where it came diagonally through the trench lines it made a gap half a mile wide of reed beds, marshy pools and willow clumps, inhabited only by flocks of water birds. Every morning at stand-to scores of wild duck rose off the marshes and flew to their daily feeding-grounds pursued by a rain of machine-gun bullets from both armies. Our position was on a hill-top looking down on the antique town of Péronne, which lay on the other bank of the Somme in German hands. Opposite to us, the very high hill of Mont St. Quentin was the watch-tower from which the enemy commanded all the country for many miles. In this neighbourhood the division had six weeks' winter trench-warfare followed by six weeks' open fighting in frost and snow.

Where we went in the line the trenches were well made and the attentions of the enemy not too severe. All through February the ground was iron hard with frost, which saved us from mud, the least endurable element of warfare. But we were short-handed, which meant continual and strenuous working-parties ; and the trenches were very close together—at their nearest point only about forty yards—which meant continuous close observation of their front line to guard against raids. In these trenches a young officer's life centred round the duty of patrolling No

Digitized by Google

Man's Land. Every night one or other of the subalterns in a front-line company would have to harden his heart, select a stout companion from the ranks, and creep like the serpent, on his belly, over the parapet into the darkness. Moving inch by inch with the delicate four-footed tread of a toad stalking a fly, halting and lying frozen flat at every creak of the barbed wire or scamper of a trench rat, dragging his body through the mud, he would move forward a yard, five yards, twenty yards in half an hour. He must be still and silent, so still that tiny sounds came to him full of meaning out of the night, till he heard the stealthy coughing of the German sentries at their posts and their infinitely careful shuffling from foot to foot. He would lie on frozen mud, minute after aching minute, because shadowy figures were creeping along the German parapet twenty yards away, and the movement of a muscle would bring instant death. He would hear the steady thump, thump of his own beating heart. If the night was clouded he might well be lost in No Man's Land and hear human sounds seeming to come from all directions, uncertain which were German and which our own, until a landmark, some well-known tangle of rusted wire, or conformation of heaped earth above a shell-hole, set him right. Best of all on clear nights was the Pole Star, on his left hand going out, and on his right hand

Digitized by Google

crawling home. This was a new aspect of nature, the aspect of a mouse cautiously emerging from its hole to make adventurous voyage five yards into a world of perils. At any moment, even if you escaped the obvious danger of being noticed or killed by a hostile post or patrol, some casual sentry might send up a Verey light to land by accident beside you, bringing immediate exposure; or low-bursting shrapnel from guns cutting the barbed wire might strike you where you lay; and this danger was as great from your own as from the German guns. Where No Man's Land was wider, larger operations of patrolling, like a game of poachers and game-keepers, might be carried out, and once in No Man's Land you were safe from bombardment between the two fires. Not so where the trenches were close together.

The great frost of February 1917 thawed at last, bringing rain and mud and snow. This moment the Germans selected to retire twenty or thirty miles to the Hindenburg line, a newly dug trench system, leaving to us the shelled area of the Somme battle-field. As they retired they laid waste the country. To break down bridges, to blow up the cross-roads with mines, to drive off the cattle and burn the crops, was legal by the barbarous code of war. In just that way Wellington covered his retreat to the lines of Torres Vedras. In sheer malice to France they

Digitized by Google

also looted the country-side, destroyed and defiled churches and ancient monuments, cut down the cider orchards on which the peasants lived, and carried away men, women and children into slavery. These are the things that make it hard for Frenchmen to forgive their enemies so quickly as we have done. From our hill-top on the Somme we saw the smoke of fifteen burning villages and the flames bursting from the historic church and library of Péronne. These things moved us little. In war

> 'Blood and destruction shall be so in use
> And dreadful objects so familiar,'

that the mind turns rather to the chance of victory. How far would the Germans retire? Would this begin the victorious advance? Should we keep them 'on the run'?

There was a period of open fighting. Squadrons of dragoons charged machine-gun posts, with uproarious infantry running behind. Advance-guards moved along open roads as they had been taught to do at Aldershot. Parties of scouts ranged boldly a mile ahead of their battalions, a very different trade from that of 'belly-crawling' between the lines in fixed trench-warfare. The excitement maintained us through long days with insufficient food and nights without shelter in a naked land. There were ten several falls of snow in April 1917, and we often slept with no

Digitized by Google

roof over our heads. Our advance ended in a night attack near Epéhy where we set out in the rain to destroy a German outpost in a wood. It grew pitch dark and the rain turned to sleet and then to heavy snow. We wandered in the dark, amid falling shells, and my horse died of exposure. In the morning we withdrew, unable to find a way through the German barbed wire, to reorganise ; and when we advanced again they slipped away unseen to the Hindenburg line. After this we went back to rest. Six weeks in frozen trenches and another six of fighting in the open had been galling. Thanks to a very active and able general the division had done well and been highly praised by Haig himself, but what of the men ? It was at this time that I examined myself and found that I was not the man I had been a year before. Though I had tried very conscientiously to do my duty in these actions, and had kept up appearances, fighting had entirely ceased to be good fun. No longer did I recount my adventures with gusto in long letters to my mother.

The sustaining force at this stage of the war was esprit de corps. It so happened that throughout the emergencies of the last nine months our company had been extremely lucky. The battalion itself had never been cut to pieces, which is surprising enough, but in the company it seemed to be always the newcomers who were killed.

Digitized by Google

The old hands, now mostly serjeants and corporals, survived everything. 'Old soldiers never die; they simply fade away'; the army song seemed to give a true account of us. As for the officers, the colonel, the adjutant and Bickersteth were all promoted and transferred but for more than a year I had been second in command of B company, with occasional intervals in command, and B company was my joy and my salvation. All things were bearable if one bore them 'with the lads.' Battles would have become terrible beyond endurance, if pride did not make a man endure what his comrades endured. Who cared that Russia was deserting her allies? Who cared that politicians were betraying the soldiers? Here in France was all the honour that could be found, in the year 1917 when honour was a name almost forgotten in the world.

It happened that fortune treated me lightly between May and September. We went into a cushy sector of the front and held outposts in open country a mile away from the Germans. No adventures came our way in the early summer, through which we sat and recuperated, looking across green fields to the barbed wire in front of the Hindenburg line, a dusty streak in the distance. Here a studious fit seized me and I sent home for a copy of Browning. At first I was mocked in the dugout as a highbrow for reading 'The Ring and the Book,' but saying

Digitized by Google

nothing I waited until one of the scoffers idly picked it up. In ten minutes he was absorbed, and in three days we were fighting for turns to read it, and talking of nothing else at meals. I had three days leave in Paris, then a long leave in England, and soon after that, was sent on a course of instruction. All France was full of training schools where officers came down from the trenches for a short holiday and intensive study of some military subject. This was an army school for budding company commanders. Glad as I was to be away from the battle, I hated being away from the company. They went into the Third Battle of Ypres in August and fought the first battalion 'show' in which I had not taken part. I was bored and nervy and irritable, moping rather than enjoying my rest, arguing with the instructors instead of learning from them. It was a proud tradition of the war that a subaltern on the spree had to be a roystering blade, devoted to women and wine; and we did our best. But of all holidays in the war I made least of this one. I was hating the war and at the same time longing to be back with the regiment.

The second detailed narrative of a battle begins with my return to duty in September 1917.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER IV

AN ADVENTURE IN THE THIRD BATTLE OF YPRES, KNOWN TO THE SOLDIERS AS THE BATTLE OF PASSCHENDAELE

§ 1

OUTWARDLY I have rarely enjoyed such a happy time as the autumn of 1917, and inwardly have rarely been more miserable. We spent long and gorgeous days in the sun, riding over the downs, lounging under the poplars that lined the high road, and training hard for the approaching battle. We were fit and numerous, well housed and well amused. This was in the undulating country near St. Omer, more than thirty miles from the battle; yet the doom that hung over the armies for so many years was now most dark and imminent. After a long period out of the trenches and a long leave in England I could not bring myself again to face the battlefield, but let my mind run riot with apprehensions and superstitions. Under the calm surface of our country life in this golden autumn weather, my mind (and, I suppose, not mine alone) was a turmoil of wild thoughts and fears from which the

Digitized by Google

dreadful fancies of malingering, desertion, even suicide could not be altogether excluded. At this date, though one hardly realised it, the overstrain of war had ruptured the nerves of Russia, shaken the balance of France and was about to bring Italy to disaster. Before the hopeless prospect of a struggle which seemed to offer no end but death now or death deferred, even the heart of an English lad grew sick : a lad who was senior subaltern of his battalion and just promoted to command a company.

Every scrap of news coming down from Passchendaele told of futile struggle with the swamps of the salient, of useless tanks bogged in the slime, of mismanaged partial attacks, of hopeless plans and angry generals, of great losses in men and small gains even in ground.

On a hot September night we marched to the railway, my horse shying all the way at its black shadow under the harvest moon. In the station yard I talked dismally with Thorburn, one of my subalterns, recently joined from another battalion which in the past had been less lucky than mine. We counted the chances and thought it time for this battalion to take a knock.

Before going up into the line the battalion spent three days in a camp between Poperinghe and Ypres. There were rows of tents standing on dry mud, with low walls of sandbags built

Digitized by Google

up eighteen inches round each tent to protect sleeping men from the side-blast of the bombs which were dropped by German aeroplanes every night. One evening Thorburn and I went in to Poperinghe to dine at La Poupée, and were damnably bombed by a low-flying aeroplane as we ' lorry-hopped ' back along the Ypres road. Another day four of us, disguised in private soldiers' tunics, went up by day beyond St. Julien to reconnoitre the front and to lay out a tape on which the first wave of the battalion might form up before ' jumping off.' This was a terrifying day on which I was quite demoralised. Almost at the beginning we found ourselves walking along Admiral's Road through a huge dump of ammunition which had been set on fire by enemy bombardment. Among the burning wooden boxes to left and right shells fizzled and burst alarmingly. At last we reached a square structure of concrete as large as a cottage, on the top of a slope, and learned that it was the captured German ' pill-box ' called Cheddar Villa. From here all the battlefield lay open ; the long bare slope down to St. Julien, the valley of the Steenbeek, choked with wreckage, churned into swamp and dotted with derelict tanks, the rising ground to Poelcapelle, and in the far distance fields and pastures new, green trees and a church spire. It brought back to me a memory of childhood, of the ' Pilgrim's Progress ' which I had not

Digitized by Google

read since nursery days: here was Christian descending into the Valley of Humiliation and seeing in the distance the Delectable Mountains 'beautified with woods, vineyards, fruits of all sorts, flowers, also with springs and fountains, very delectable to behold,' but in the path there lay 'a wilderness, a land of deserts and pits; a land of drought, and of the shadow of death!' There was 'also in that valley a continual howling and yelling, as of people under unutterable misery, who there sat bound in afflictions and irons; over that valley hang the discouraging clouds of confusion; death also doth always spread his wings over it. In a word, it is every whit dreadful, being utterly without order'; while 'at the other end of this valley lay blood, bones, ashes and mangled bodies of men, even of pilgrims that had gone this way formerly.'

Our duty somehow done, we returned to camp at midnight. Next day I was miserable beyond belief, description or cure. A sort of blank numbness, such as seems to envelop criminals in the condemned cell, settled on my spirits, suggesting to me in many ways which I rationally knew to be impossible that the Valley of the Shadow might be avoided. There was much routine work to be done, which I did in an unreal mood as if it were a game, a piece of play-acting. My true self had been filled with the pre-

Digitized by Google

sentiment that this was the end, that I was marked to die or be crushed in the military machine; I thought the human spirit could endure no longer postponement of the terror. I arranged that day to meet my brother in another regiment, but we were too busy to see much of one another, and I too constrained to be very friendly. Before going up the line on the afternoon of October 3rd, we moved again to another camp under the walls of Ypres; and while the men had tea I went to Brigade Headquarters, where at a company commanders' meeting we checked and explained to one another the details of our plans. By this time I was beside myself and noticed how one ego calmly talked tactics while the other knew that all this energy was moonshine. One half of me was convinced that all this was real; the other knew it was illusion.

When I returned to camp to find the men falling in in fighting order, an orderly thrust into my hand an intelligence report saying that the Germans had doubled their front-line posts. Two German companies were now holding the front I was to attack with one. Towards dusk we marched out of Reigersburg Camp by platoons. Men going into action support themselves by a sort of enforced hysterical cheerfulness, but no one could be cheerful in the Third Battle of Ypres. I marched with Serjeant Walker (acting company serjeant-major) at the head of the

Digitized by Google

company, and we talked quietly of other marches into battle. As always, I found my mind clearing. The mental numbness of the last few days had given place to a numbness in the pit of the stomach. I was not now afraid, though I had a growing presentiment that I should be wounded. We crossed the Ypres canal, turned east at International Corner and presently led off the road in single file along a trench-board track. A battery of heavy howitzers fired over our heads as we left the road, the shock and flash almost blowing us flat in the mud. Before long the inevitable checks began in the column, and where we halted the ground was pitted with ominous new shell-holes, reeking of high explosives and powdered with brown grains of freshly scattered earth. In such a place one waited with impatience. Talbot, the adjutant, imperturbable as ever, strolled down the line and gossiped, but we could find little to look forward to with optimism. At Cheddar Villa we left the track and closed on the St. Julien Road. It was dark enough for the gun-teams to bring up supplies of ammunition, and the road was crowded with limbers and strings of pack-mules. As we approached St. Julien there was some confusion when platoons lost touch ; mules and men and wagons crowded in the narrow way, until where the culvert passed over the Steenbeek the traffic jammed, shoulder to wheel. This

Digitized by Google

was a windy moment, for on this line the Boche guns were laid and here from time to time they dropped hurricane barrages of shell-fire. Indeed, a few shells had already fallen to our right, and massacre might come at any minute; but we got through in safety. Beyond the Steenbeek there were no roads: guides led us by marked tracks among the shell-holes past the pill-box called Springfield and over the low ridge which had once been the Langemarck-Gheluvelt line. Our jumping-off place lay down the forward slope marked by the tape laid two nights before. To find the way in the dark was a task worthy of Bunyan's pilgrim: 'the pathway was here also exceeding narrow, and therefore good Christian was the more put to it; for when he sought in the dark, to shun the ditch on the one hand, he was ready to tip over into the mire on the other. Thus he went on, for the pathway was here so dark, that ofttimes, when he lifted up his foot to set forward, he knew not where, nor upon what, he should set it next. And ever and anon the flame and smoke would come out in such abundance, with sparks and hideous noises . . . thus he went on a great while; yet still the flames would be reaching towards him: Also he heard doleful voices and rushings to and fro, so that sometimes he thought he should be torn to pieces, or trodden down like mire in the streets.'

Digitized by Google

§ 2

The four platoons found their way to their places, two in front and two behind, a movement which they had so often practised on a similar piece of ground thirty miles away. I, after some deliberation, decided to pass the night at Stroppe Farm, a forlorn heap of broken timber under which was a sort of hutch or den in which it was safe to show a light. My company had two other officers, Kerr and Sinker, for Thorburn, who has already been mentioned, had been left behind in reserve. The two joined their platoons, while I crawled under the wreckage to find the hutch already occupied by Captain Morshead of the 16th Battalion, whose company adjoined mine on the left; nor was I unwilling to share with him and not spend the night alone. It was damp and not cold. With little help from me Morshead chatted on, and I remember that I paid him five francs which he had lent me. Once in the night I went out to make a round of the company positions, but when the enemy started dropping shells into our area I was glad to take refuge in a little dry trench which No. 6 platoon had found. This platoon was more pleasant to visit than the others lying exposed to shell-fire in the open.

An hour before dawn the gas projectors on the hill behind went off with bright flashes, hurling

Digitized by Google

opened cylinders of gas on to the enemy position at Winchester 1,000 yards away, and warning us that the time was short. Morshead wished me good luck and went to his battle position; I sent word to Sinker to take the morning rum issue round the platoons, and was then left to dissemble before my orderlies. At this stage I found myself fidgety and restless, longing for zero hour when, I believed, the worst would soon be over. I was preparing to make a final round of the platoons when an enemy shell whizzed evilly overhead and burst near the centre of my second wave.[1] No shell during the night had fallen so near. While I hesitated to distinguish what particular target was being fired on before choosing my path, there began a ghostly procession of 'whizzbangs,' whining sounds neither very fast nor very loud, as if they came from batteries well behind the German lines, but sounds which ended each in the sharp roar and metallic clang of shrapnel bursting on the slope behind me. I resigned myself to waiting for the end of a 'morning strafe,' and began to think that I might get my 'blighty one'[2] without the added

[1] My company was to advance in two 'waves,' each of two platoons, the second wave being drawn up a hundred yards behind the first.

[2] Blighty—a soldier's corruption of the Hindustani word for one's native district. Hence used for England by soldiers serving abroad. A blighty wound is one serious enough to send you back to England.

Digitized by Google

unpleasantness of going over the top. It was now about twenty minutes before zero, which was to be six o'clock.

As the shells came faster and faster, crashing into the waste of mud and hedge-stumps which hid our assembled brigade, I could not disguise from myself that the Boches had forestalled us with a full-dress bombardment of our jumping-off line. I began to wonder whether a Boche attack was coming, ignorant of ours; or whether (and this frightened me the more) they had learned our plans and would shatter our huddled groups —as they had done in August—before we left our lines. Should I visit the platoon in this shell-storm, or should I stay in my battle-position in touch with battalion headquarters? I decided to stay, believing that our own attack, thrown into confusion by the shelling, must break down, wondering whether there might be new orders, a postponement, a change of plan.

In the meanwhile I emerged from the hut beneath the fallen rafters and get down into a rude trench where two shell-holes have been joined together. With me one orderly, Lewis, crouches, looking more frightened than I think I look; the others with Serjeant Walker crouch behind the ruins ten yards away. When I shout to them they reply cheerily and are more hopeful for the rest of the company than I am. I wait stolidly; Lewis shifts uneasily.

Digitized by Google

Suddenly the sky behind me threw up a stab of flame! A roll of thunder like the last trump itself opened with some few single blows and steadied into a throbbing roar. The shells screamed overhead so thick and fast they seemed to eclipse the sky as with an invisible roof, rumbling like earthquakes behind, crashing like a thousand cymbals before us, a pillar of fire against the dark sky, a pillar of cloud against the dawning east—leading us on!

It is zero hour and our barrage has fallen, blotting out the German bombardment with a drumfire forty times as great; there is no more thought or feeling, no more fear or doubt; only an endless blast of sound; a flicker of flame in the sky, a roaring and howling of shells over our heads, and a smoky pall of shrapnel.

My brain cleared though my ears were singing; the plan stood in my mind like a picture: I wondered how many men were left to carry it out. We must follow hard on the barrage and be on the enemy before they had recovered from the first shock of it. I jumped out of the trench, shouting to my little group, and together we stumbled forward towards the enemy. Behind me came Serjeant Walker, my servant Stanley, three runners, Lewis, Campbell and Greenwood, and then the signallers struggling with their gear and quickly falling behind. Looking round I can see no one else, no sign of human life

Digitized by Google

or activity; but who cares? Skirting round shell-holes, and straggling over rough ground in half darkness, our group loses all order and trails after me in single file. A bank with a row of smashed dugouts looms up in front. It is familiar enough on the map, and empty. I draw my revolver and scramble over it. On behind the thunder and lightning of the barrage. (Like cannon balls rolled down sheets of iron over our heads.) One is thankful for a steel helmet. Then through the tumult I isolate a distinct noise, a spitting, a crackling, like children's fireworks. Rifle bullets! Phut! Phut! Small arms indeed! We look about vaguely. It seems to have grown already a little lighter, so that lumps loom up irregularly in front thirty yards away—half left. Heads! Three or four heads of Boches in a shell-hole shooting at us! We see them together. Stanley shouts and brandishes his bayonet. Then I see Campbell lying curled up and grey-faced at my feet. Why, he's dead! And by God, they've hit 'Tiny' Greenwood. He is staggering about and bellowing, his hand on his chest. Stanley catches and lowers him to the ground behind the stunted ruins of a hedge-row which gives a little cover. Crack, crack, crack, come the bullets at thirty yards' range, aimed more distinctly every moment as the light grows and the barrage lifts ahead. They are even near enough to throw a bomb. Stanley

Digitized by Google

and I fumble with field-dressings. There are now only three of us and three Boches shooting at us from cover. At least let's quiet this poor lad's confounded roaring and then make a plan. Poor 'Tiny' Greenwood, the smallest man in the company and the willingest. I remember my morphine tablets and give him one, two and three till he is silent. Stanley rises and shouts again, "Come on, sir, let's go for the swine." "No," I say, "get down in this shell-hole," and I am right. There is no chance for three men to charge three over the mud and pitfalls. Stanley plucks me by the sleeve and says plaintively. "Aw, come on, sir." Walker and I get down in the hole and begin to shoot though Stanley stands and calls us once more. "Come down, you fool," I order him. Then he comes down, slithering on the edge of the shell-hole, dropping his rifle with a clatter. A bullet has hit him in the eye, smashing his left brow and cheek-bone into a ghastly hole. I am dumbfounded with rage and horror. They have got Stanley, best of friends and loyallest of servants, and my last orderly. Walker and I are pent up in this hole and dare not move. Stanley is dead, who has always supported me, Stanley who gave me confidence in myself.

I sat stupidly in the half-light, not looking at my servant's body, and then vaguely imitated

Digitized by Google

Walker, who was firing on the Boches when they showed their heads. I must have fired my revolver before this time, and now picked up Stanley's rifle, coated with mud from fixed bayonet to stock. With difficulty I fired a round or two, wrenching at the clogged mechanism after each shot. Walker gave a cry of joy as he got one Boche through the head, but one or two more ran up from neighbouring shell-holes and made the odds still heavier against us. Still our own guns thundered overhead, and now the German guns began to reassert themselves, dropping a few shells experimentally in their own lines, which they guessed had fallen into our hands. The stubborn group confronting us still held their place under fire of their own artillery. Ceasing to fire at us except when we showed our heads, they sent up signal rockets to give their position to their own observers.

But for the roaring of our own shrapnel two hundred yards away, there was no other sign of English activity. No other Englishman could be seen or heard, and, fatal event, we had 'lost the barrage.' In the midst of a great battle ours was an independent duel. Down in a shell-hole where the view was restricted by towering ridges and ramps of thrown-up earth, we had the limited vision of the mole. There must have been ten thousand men hidden in the landscape, though we had not seen ten. I began

Digitized by Google

to wonder whether our attack had been destroyed and was to be the tragedy of to-morrow's *communiqué* in the German Press. "Yesterday after intense drumfire the English attacked east of Ypres and were driven back to their lines by our gallant 'field greys'." Perhaps even my own group was the only one which had advanced, in which case we might be able to hide here all day and creep back at dusk, to the remnants of the shattered battalion. How could the day be not lost now that the shrapnel banged so far ahead and no one seemed to be advancing? Waiting in the broadening light time passed—seconds or hours, we had no conception, till we heard voices behind us, a Lewis-gun rattling, and a reserve platoon at hand. I shouted to them to support us by outflanking this group of Germans, and as we opened fire again invisible Lewis-gunners crept closer over the mountainous shell-holes. The Boches ceased fire. At that moment Walker leaped up with a shout and began to shoot in a new direction. Following his aim I saw straight to the front and a hundred yards away a crowd of men running towards us in grey uniforms. Picking up another rifle I joined him in pouring rapid fire into this counter-attack. We saw one at least drop, to Walker's rifle I think, then noticed that they were running with their hands held up. Laughing, we emptied our magazines at them in spite of that, but at

Digitized by Google

this point one of my favourite N.C.O.s, Corporal Fell, came tumbling into the shell-hole, hit through both thighs and bearing the pain with no more than a grunt or two. As I tried to bandage his four wounds with one field dressing, and discussed how his Lewis-gun had appeared to save us, I forgot the crowd of 'Kamerads.' Just as I was telling him to crawl home as best he could, twenty or thirty Germans came running up with that shambling gait and bucolic manner I had always noticed in them, emphasised by the awkward gesture of their raised hands. The nearest had not seen me in the shell-hole, and as he approached, noticing a red cross on his arm I reached up and pulled him up short by the skirt of his greatcoat with a jerk that frightened him out of his wits. "Ambulance," I said, pointing to the wounded corporal. Then hardly stopping to see more, Walker and I rose, collected the Lewis-gun and its team and continued our advance. The surrendering Germans carried back our wounded men and we barely noticed in the excitement that the four snipers who had held us up so long slipped into the crowd of captives and went away with them. We should certainly not have given them quarter if we had thought of it in time.

Once out of our burrow the scene was changed. The long rolling valley was visible again running down to the brook called the Stroombeek, and

Digitized by Google

STRETCHER-BEARERS IN THE SALIENT

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

on the rising slope towards Winchester the shrapnel of our barrage was now bursting, making a picture more like a battle in the 'Illustrated London News.' In full daylight at last we could see scattered parties of men advancing and none of them very far in front of us. Again my hesitations vanished and I led the way towards our objective. Before we had gone a hundred yards we met two serjeants of A company, both old friends, a little lost with their platoons, but not at all disconcerted. I ordered them to stay there and dig in, for the battalion seemed very scattered and it seemed wise to consolidate these gains, in a battle where the Boche was very quick to counter-attack. While they obeyed and chose a position unwillingly, I halted to write a report and mark up a situation map; then leaving my Lewis-gun with the serjeants I continued to advance with Serjeant Walker and two or three men. On our right were Colonial troops attacking in much greater strength than ours, so that my own front looked empty but theirs crowded with men, and before long one of their platoons came straying across my front. It suddenly struck me that I knew the platoon commander; I seized him by the hand and introduced myself. As we exchanged civilities I became aware that we were under machine-gun fire. I was explaining that he had gone astray when this diversion occurred

Digitized by Google

in his proper direction, and hastily clapping him on the back, I sent him off to strafe the machine-gun, an order which he willingly obeyed. He had no sooner gone away than in the excitement of the battle I forgot all about him: his name escaped me and I have not been able to recall his face. At least the machine-gun shortly ceased to fire.

Several other groups of men were now converging with us on a rough path of planks across the marshy Stroombeek. Here we fell in with Flint of C company, still commanding a whole platoon, and hence we sent back another message to headquarters by a machine-gun officer who had reconnoitred his position and was returning for his guns. Crossing the bridge we deployed half left and advanced up a slope towards some wreckage which we took to be Albatross or Wellington Farm. Under heavy shell-fire and some distant machine-gun fire we skirmished up the slope from hole to hole, till Flint reached the ruin and dugout that we thought was Wellington; but to our surprise it was already in English hands. Parton of A company was there, presiding with a few men over a captured anti-tank gun. Flint was properly in reserve to A company, while I should have been on their left, so to that direction I sheered off to get in touch again with Captain Morshead of the 16th Battalion with whom I had spent the night at Stroppe Farm.

Digitized by Google

On the crest of the rise we caught up our own barrage and halted where the banging, smashing shrapnels were bursting on the first objective. Presently we edged farther to the left, because one of our guns was consistently firing short and dropping shells among us. Topping the rise I saw before me two smashed pill-boxes among gigantic shell-holes. I picked up here a German automatic pistol. In the shadow of the pill-box was lying the body of a British officer, which proved that we were again in touch with our own people. Beyond it we found a party of the 16th Battalion consolidating an enormous shell-hole. We had met exactly on the flank of our objective.

§ 3

Some stretcher-bearers had swelled our little party as we went up the slope, but they now joined the 16th, their own battalion. We finally selected a large shell-hole under the lee of the broken pill-box of Winchester, and settled down to resist the probable counter-attack. Soon Hesketh, an officer of the 16th, arrived with a larger party and we became an insignificant detail of the defence. I had sent the last stretcher-bearer back with still another situation report, and another man to fetch up the Lewis-gun, which we had left to cover our advance. So of all the company, Serjeant Walker, the com-

Digitized by Google

pany sanitary man, Bridgwater, who had drifted in from somewhere or other, and I, were the only representatives, and though we had got here first we soon began to feel that we were merely getting in the way of the 16th. Hesketh was only a junior subaltern, but he had his men very well in hand, and set them to work briskly, improving the shell-hole and organising reliefs. There was very little for me to do with my remnant, so I even sent Serjeant Walker away to look for any more of the company. We were disappointed to find that a large party of men moving up in artillery formation was not our second wave but D company, all of whose officers were hit and who were now lost. But no more men came near us save some trench-mortar people looking for a firing position, which they found not far away.

The morning wore on. The barrage had thundered ahead, leaving an open space of ground three hundred yards deep, over which no third wave had gone. Attackers and defenders at this point had spent their force. We had got our objective and were too ludicrously weak to move again. A few shells were coming over and a persistent sniper fired occasionally, his bullets crashing into the ruins of the pill-box beside us. Away to the left we saw two British tanks crawling forward into Poelcapelle. The battlefield was undisturbed, though the fire curtain was unceasing

Digitized by Google

in front and the thunders rolled perpetually over our heads.[1]

Paterson, second in command of the 16th, came striding over the shell-holes alone, reconnoitring the front. He pointed out the open country before us and tried to make me advance. As I had no men, a strong position and my final objective, I refused. He went on a little disgusted towards A company on the right, but as he walked round the pill-box, the Boche sniper viciously firing at him, he noticed the body we had seen lying there. He called to me that it was Captain Morshead, and that he was alive. I went out and found the latter shot through the neck, no doubt by that same sniper, and hardly conscious. I gave him some water, and two men came out and carried him into the shell-hole. There, after being bandaged by the stretcher-bearers, he recognised us and tried to speak. Soon they carried him down the line; and he died in hospital, the day after being awarded the Military Cross.

Towards midday, the enemy shelling really began. Black shrapnels crashed overhead and huge crumps burst round us among the ruins. We all crouched down into our one deep shell-hole, which I began to regret, as a single shell in it would kill us all. One or two men were hit;

[1] The Contact aeroplane flew over about this time to discover how far we had advanced; we lighted flares for it.

Digitized by Google

especially, I remember, one who was standing up with his sleeves rolled up, when a shrapnel burst right above us. A sliver of steel came down and hit him lengthwise on the bare forearm, making a clean cut three inches long between the two bones, as if his arm had been slit with a knife. To my horror the wound gaped open like a freshly cut shoulder of mutton. Though this was as 'cushy' a wound as man could desire, the sight of it cured me of hoping for a 'blighty one.' The victim agreed with me, for he danced and cried out with the pain.

My Lewis-gunners were now in position close by, and it seemed that the best way to reduce the crowd in the shell-hole was to go away myself. Hesketh didn't want me and showed it; goodness knows, I didn't want to stay there; Paterson passing again, agreed with me, and I decided to work back towards Stroppe Farm, pick up stragglers, and reorganise. So Walker, Bridgwater and I turned back down the hill through very heavy shell-fire across the Stroombeek, and over the plain now scattered with grey drifting clouds of smoke from high-explosive shells. Hardly out of the swamp we ran into Lance-Corporal Reese of No. 7 platoon with a few men and another gun. They were all that was left of the platoon, and had dug in, satisfied that they had reached their objective. At last we got back to Stanley's body, where I stopped not without a

Digitized by Google

shudder to remove my glasses, all spattered with brains and blood, from his shoulder; I had to leave the strap, which was too gruesome to carry. Then we found our company stretcher-bearers performing prodigies of work, in spite, they were convinced, of being under deliberate German shell-fire, and using the little trench where I had visited one of my platoons last night as a rendezvous. Pringle was the leading spirit of this party, and I forthwith relieved him of this non-combatant duty to make him an acting section-commander.[1] In this trench I made my head-quarters, and we tried to learn the situation. One officer, Sinker, seemed to have been hit while taking round the rum at the jumping-off place; a serjeant and a corporal went down wounded before zero. Otherwise the company started well. They all found groups of Germans resisting long and bravely in the front line. Another serjeant was killed early, and a third badly hit in the face. My own party had a typical experience. Kerr with No. 8 platoon got farther forward, killed some Boches, and was shot himself in a hand-to-hand encounter. So the company had been scattered.

A man called Whitworth came down from the Lewis-gun section still up at Winchester to ask if they were to stay there. He was a good fellow, and I discussed the whole situation with him,

[1] Pringle received the Military Medal after this action.

Digitized by Google

and told him to wait till I had reported the company's condition to battalion headquarters.

Always very nervous when alone under shell-fire, and badly shaken after the day's experiences and the bombardment at Winchester, I found the walk of two or three hundred yards to Victoria Farm terrifying. Shells seemed to pursue me up the slope, and catch me when no deep shell-hole was near. I floundered in oceans of knee-deep mud and flung myself flat, when one shell fell close, on what looked like fairly solid ground, but turned out to be as thin as half-cooked porridge. So the whole front of me from the chest down was soaked through and coated with slime.

At last I struggled up to the little half-broken pill-box and went in. The Colonel and Adjutant were plainly very pleased to see me, having given me up for lost. The battalion had been shattered, they said, but all objectives taken and held, a hundred and fifty prisoners made, and immense numbers of Boches killed. Everyone had had adventures. Several officers had been killed, besides Kerr, who they feared was dying, but had been got down safely. Where had I been? I found that of my three, or maybe four, beautiful messages, with maps and times and places all complete, nothing had reached head-quarters. They produced news of a few more of my men. The Colonel saw the Boche revolver

Digitized by Google

hanging at my belt and sent it down to the transport to be kept for me. They gave me the good news that Thorburn had been sent for and would join me to-night, and the bad news, too, that, casualties or no casualties, we were not to be relieved for three days. The Colonel suggested that when Thorburn arrived I should come and join them in the dugout and get some sleep.

Then he came out with me and we returned to the remnants of my company. More tragedies! While I was away Whitworth had been sitting above the trench talking. In the dusk he was suddenly silent. No one had noticed a shell splinter from some far-away burst fly over and hit him in the head. He was breathing when we arrived, but, the stretcher-bearers said, as good as dead already. Nevertheless, they took him down to the dressing-station. The poor devils were beat after saving lives all day.

Then I settled down in the little trench, about twelve feet long and six feet deep and wonderfully dry, to wait for Thorburn. We were fairly safe, though the shelling never completely stopped. About eight o'clock Thorburn arrived with a runner. He was very cheery and congratulated me. We agreed that our conversation a week before had proved prophetic: the battalion had taken a nasty knock this time. Then I left him in charge and went up to Victoria, where they welcomed me. The C.O. shared a tin of hot food

Digitized by Google

with me, my first meal that day, though I think we had eaten a snack in the trench with the stretcher-bearers. Then Armstrong, the intelligence officer, took me in hand with an endless story about himself, the C.O. and a wounded Boche.

"When I was going round with the C.O. this morning after you'd gone over we found a wounded Boche lying in the mud—down there by the Stroombeek where you couldn't get him out. He was dying, I should think."

"Yes," said I sleepily, "there were hundreds."

"Well, this one," Armstrong continued, "he was done for, squirming, the poor devil was, and anyhow there was no chance of getting him down to a dressing-station from there. Best to put him out of his misery, you'd say, wouldn't you, Edmonds?"

"Yes, I suppose so; let's get some sleep."

"Oh, well," said Armstrong, "just wait. Damn funny it was. We found this Boche: there was the C.O. and me and a runner; and the C.O. said to the runner, 'You'd best shoot the poor fellow,' and the Boche just lay there and groaned. He knew. But, you know, the runner couldn't do it. He unslung his rifle and fingered the trigger and just couldn't do it. So the C.O. turned to me and when it came to the point no more could I: so the C.O. drew his gun himself and went up to the Boche and looked

Digitized by Google

fierce, and the Boche squirmed and I'm damned if the C.O. didn't weaken too. Damn funny, wasn't it? And we just left him there, so I suppose he'll die in the mud to-night."

But by this time I was asleep, having found a quiet corner. It was luxury for five of us to lie down on a concrete floor in a concrete cellar only fifteen feet square and with no door.

In the morning I went out early to my men, and found all well and Thorburn a tower of strength. While we were cooking breakfast on a 'Tommy's cooker,'[1] General Hutchinson with a staff officer and his galloper came wandering up from the rear, and in full view of the enemy. He talked cheerily to us, as always, and then pointed out a wounded Boche in a little hollow, a few yards away, whose legs were shattered and who was trying to walk on his knees with two crutches of broken timber. We had known of this man before, but were leaving him until our own wounded were all in. 'Hutchy' insisted on our attending to this man first. Then he wandered on fearlessly to the front.

Orders came soon to move up to the Stroombeek and dig in a second line. We were now to be support company. Thorburn and I went on first, and Walker followed with the company. The ground was very bad and strewn with bodies. We only found one wounded Englishman still

[1] A portable spirit stove small enough to go in the pocket.

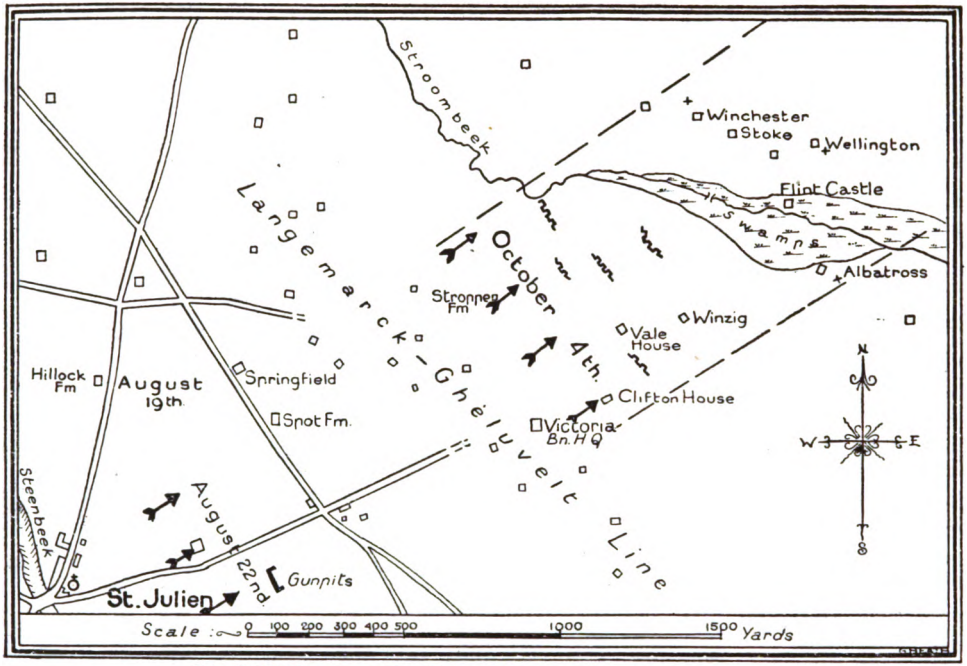
Digitized by Google

lying out, but the dead were everywhere. One noted grimly that the Boches outnumbered the English without any doubt. Round Kerr's objective they lay especially thick, and here we settled in a group of shell-holes. Someone volunteered to find No. 8 platoon's Lewis-gun section, which was supposed to have dug in near by. It arrived presently—several men with a self-appointed leader called Sykes. This remarkable young man, a lanky dark youth, new to the company and never in action before, had been with Kerr and described the latter's gallantry and end. He had then seen that the N.C.O.s were all killed, so had taken charge of the gun and the section (since there was no very senior man among them); he had finished off this party of Germans, had gone forward to his correct objective, dug in and remained there the night, and most wonderful of all, had kept his gun in action and cleaned it, in that mud. I am prepared to swear it was the only clean gun in the Ypres salient. He had found his objective, merely from his platoon-commander's description of it, while most of us officers, having pored over maps for weeks past, and reconnoitred the ground in advance, could find our way to nowhere at all. He knew exactly where everything was and appreciated the tactical position perfectly.[1]

So I put this prodigy, confirmed in the com-

[1] Sykes received the Military Medal after this action.

Digitized by Google



ST. JULIEN AND THE STROOMBEEK, OCTOBER 4TH, 1917.
A landscape of mud and water-logged shell-holes. The small squares represent German 'pill boxes.'

Digitized by Google

mand of his section, to watch the crossing of the Stroombeek. Thorburn and I drifted over to a hedge beside the stream, and got in touch with D company, who had lost all their officers but not many men. They were holding some remains of trenches near Albatross, which turned out to be only a ruined dugout of logs and earth. They had been lost and had never come into action yesterday. Now a subaltern called Wolfe had come up to command them. They were on our right.

From there we followed the swampy stream along to a little newly discovered pill-box. This had lain unsuspected in our area, but had been captured by the Colonials, who were much thicker on the ground than we were and had squeezed us over towards the left. Marriott and Flint were just taking this sector over from them with the remains of C company, about twenty of our men relieving fifty or sixty of theirs under a cheerful middle-aged officer, who was very thankful for the help our stretcher-bearers had given him. His men had dug quite a good continuous trench in the night, in dead ground just behind the low crest of the eastern bank of the Stroombeek.

Wolfe, Thorburn and I then settled in a shell-hole with the company, which had now risen to about twenty-five strong. The fourth Lewis-gun had turned up now, having been kept by the sole survivor of the team, who, of course, had no

Digitized by Google

ammunition, but had dug in for the night and was apparently prepared to stay in position whether the gun would fire or not. But no more N.C.O.s came in. Both officers, all four platoon serjeants, eleven out of twelve section commanders had been hit; only Serjeant Walker and I and Lance-Corporal Reese, whose stripe was not a week old, were left. No wonder the company was a little scattered.

Though the day had started well, it was to turn out the most wretched of my life. The three of us crouched happily enough in our circular pit, five feet in diameter, and dug it down till it was five feet deep. We talked of what people do talk of in such situations, 'shop,' the chance of relief, yesterday's adventures, to-day's expectations, details of food supply, and sometimes reminiscences. We knew there would be heavy shelling sooner or later, but felt disinclined to discuss that. One had a curious undefined superstition that to mention it might attract it.

As we were in full view of the enemy on the right front, along the valley of the Stroombeek, the movement of men in and near our position drew its reward. When the German gunners really settled down to their day's shooting they gave us their fullest attention. There was no drumfire, no hurricane barrage, but a steady

Digitized by Google

slow bombardment of the whole valley with heavies; all day the fire grew in intensity and accuracy; and occasionally the area was raked over with a finer shower of field-gun shells. We had nothing to do but to sit and listen for the roar of the 5·9's, lasting for five seconds each, perhaps twice a minute. One would be talking aimlessly of some unimportant thing when the warning would begin. The speaker's voice would check for an infinitesimal fraction of a second; then he would finish his sentence with a studied normality marvellously true to life. Everyone listened hard to the conversation, but with more than half an ear cocked in the direction of the enemy. If the shell were coming close, one would crouch down against the side of the pit, apparently as a mere perfunctory precaution, actually with delight that one could take cover unashamed. When the shell had burst in a smother of black smoke, and the clods and whining splinters had ceased to fall pattering around, one went on with the conversation.

It was a kind of round game, in which a man felt he had lost a point every time a grunt or a remark about the danger was fetched out of him.

Thorburn won easily; of course he had been through nothing yet but a night in a safe, dry trench. Yet this trial might well have finished off a fresh man. The shells fell consistently among our men (who, however, were well scattered

Digitized by Google

"THE LIMITED VISION OF THE MOLE"
(A shell-hole in the Salient.)

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

and in the deepest shell-holes); every other one would fling a shower of mud on to our helmets. About one in five or six would fall near enough to shake the parapet, blast its pungent fumes in our faces, and set every nerve in our bodies jangling. Wolfe came out in an unexpected light; he was a tall, pale, flabby medical student in spectacles, and until that day I had had but a poor opinion of him. Every time a shell fell near he proceeded to tell us that he had a very strong presentiment: nothing was going to hit him that day. He said it so often, with such conviction, and so ingenuously, that it cheered me wonderfully, even at the worst moments. He did nothing and seemed to care little, but was quite contented about himself.

I needed some cheering up. I had had very much worse times than either of the others, but cannot deceive myself, all the same, that I never could stand shell-fire. I got into a thoroughly neurotic state during the day. Enduring a bombardment is the opportunity for that kind of nervous disease which made Dr. Johnson touch every post as he walked along Fleet Street. You think of absurd omens and fetishes to ward off the shell you hear coming. A strong inward feeling compels you to sit in a certain position, to touch a particular object, to whistle so many bars of a tune silently between your teeth. If you complete the charm in time you are safe—

Digitized by Google

until the next one. This absurdity becomes a dark, overpowering fatalism. You contemplate with horror that you have made a slip in the self-imposed ritual, or that the augury sign of your own invention shows against you. You imagine that the shells are more deliberate and accurate than could be possible. They seem to have a volition of their own and to wander malevolently until they see a target on which to pounce; they seem to hurl themselves with intention sounding in the fierce roar of their near approach; they defy your mute relief when they fall far away, by sending slivers of jagged steel sighing and murmuring hundreds of yards towards you, long after the shock of the explosion is spent and gone.

Every gun and every kind of projectile had its own personality. Old soldiers always claimed that they knew the calibre of a shell by its sound and could always foretell which shells were going to fall dangerously close. Yet far more than they calculated depended on the range and the nature of the intervening ground. Sometimes a field-gun shell would leap jubilantly with the pop of a champagne cork from its muzzle, fly over with a steady buzzing crescendo, and burst with a fully expected bang; sometimes a shell would be released from a distant battery of heavies to roll across a huge arc of sky, gathering speed and noise like an approaching express train, ponderous and certain. Shells flying over

Digitized by Google

valleys and woods echoed strangely and defied anticipation; shells falling in enclosed spaces simply arrived with a double bang and no warning at all. Some shells whistled, others shrieked, others wobbled through space gurgling like water poured from a decanter.

So all the day you listened, calculated, hoped or despaired, making imaginary bargains with fate, laying odds with yourself on the chances of these various horrors. One particular gun would seem to be firing more directly on you than the others. You would wait for its turn so intently as to forget other perhaps more real dangers. At last it comes. You hold frenziedly on to the conversation; you talk a little too fast; your nerves grow tense, and while you continue to look and talk like a man, your involuntary muscles get a little out of hand. Are your knees quivering a little? Are you blinking? Is your face contorted with fear? You wonder and cannot know. Force yourself to do something, say something, think something, or you will lose control. Get yourself in hand with some voluntary action. Drum out a tune with your finger-tips upon your knee. Don't hurry—keep time—get it finished, and you will be safe this once. Here superstition and neurasthenia step in. Like the child who will not walk on the lines in the pavement and finds real safety in putting each foot on a square stone you feel that your ritual protects you. As

Digitized by Google

the roar of an approaching shell rises nearer and louder you listen in inward frenzy to the shell, in outward calm to the conversation. Steady with those nervous drum-taps on your knee; don't break time or the charm is broken and the augury vain. The shell roars near. What is Thorburn saying?

"Oh yes! The rations came up at nine o'clock, enough for twice our numbers." (Explosion!)

Thank God, the tune was finished soon enough. But then comes an overwhelming rush of panic. The next shell will be the nearest, the climax of the day. What is the next shell when the air is never free from their sound? The next that is at all near. But how near? Which is near enough to break the tension? Thorburn is saying, "We haven't issued the rum to-day. Best do it at dusk, don't you think?" (Terrific explosion!) "God," you say with a gasp, dropping for an instant the mask of indifference. You eye the others guiltily and wonder if they are going through the same performance. At least are you keeping up appearances as well as they do? What a comfort that Wolfe's augury is so optimistic.

Once in the afternoon I was on the point of breaking down. My luck turned; the self-deluding charm failed; omens were bad and a shell roared into the mud throwing clods and

Digitized by Google

whining splinters on our heads. I swore and moved nervously and lost control of my features.

"Steady," said Thorburn, putting a hand on my arm.

That was my nadir. The shelling slackened and stopped, until between Wolfe's optimism and Thorburn's unconcern I revived my good spirits.

§ 4

It rained that evening. The sides of the shell-hole first became slimy, then crumbled away in schloops of mud, then began to be hollowed out in channels by little rivulets of water. Our dry foothold became a puddle. The water dripped off the rim of our helmets into the back of our necks. In spite of all precautions the skirts of our raincoats slopped mud on to our knees. The last stronghold of dryness was defeated in the end when a puddle formed on the ledge behind me and I soaked the seat of my trousers. There was no prospect of getting dry or of sitting in a dry place for eight-and-forty hours. The ground, which had been thick and soggy like porridge, now became thin and sloppy like soup. In moving about one had been able to walk on the dry rims of the shell-holes and to avoid the sludgy bottoms of them. Now one walked on sludgy ridges to avoid the pools of water in every hole. The Stroombeek, a miserable little drainage

Digitized by Google

ditch, which the bombardment had scattered into a bog thirty yards wide, spread wider and wetter still.

Soon after dark, Newsom of A company came slopping through the mud with five or six men. He was lost (everybody was always lost in the dark) and looking for his company in a little trench near Albatross. He was even shorter of men than we were, and persuaded me to lend him Lance-Corporal Reese, which I did, to help a front-line company. Then feeling that I ought to do something, I offered to lead him to the little pill-box at C company headquarters, from where he could easily find his own way. A little hedge ran from my position to the Stroombeek, and along this we started. We had only a hundred yards to go. The swamp was wetter and the stream broader than in the morning. We wandered on, wading ankle deep, treading on roots or mounds of mud when we could find them. It seemed a long way. We got too deep into the water and struck to the right again to find the bank. But there was no dry place, just an endless swamp—puddles, mud, chaos. The earth was without form and void. I had to admit that I was lost.

We wandered vaguely; it was as dark as the Pit.

Presently a British battery opened fire, dropping shells unpleasantly close in front of us. We must be right up to the front line then, such

Digitized by Google

front line as there was. A smart bombardment began, which forced us to crouch down, for we could take no proper cover in this marsh. (There are no words in English for the omnipresent wetness, the sliminess, the stickiness of the mud, the gouts that you found clogging your fingers, and wiped off accidentally in your hair when you adjusted your helmet, the smears of it that appeared on your clean message forms and your mess-tin, the saturation of your clothes with its semi-solid filthiness, the smell of it, and the taste of it, and the colour of it.)

As we could only expect, the German guns began to retaliate. We were not reassured to find ourselves between the two fires. The Boche shells fell close behind us, the English close in front; we had wandered out into No Man's Land.

This smart little artillery duel threw shells all about us for a long time. We moved about trying to avoid the danger, and soon became entirely confused as to direction. The shells whizzed down from all sides, bursting with red showers of sparks and pungent whiffs of smoke, and, difficult as it was to locate it in the dark, we endeavoured to find the empty vortex of the storm. We were helpless here for some unmeasured time, wet through, cold and paddling through seas of slime in absolute blackness broken only by the occasional gleam of a high bursting shell.

At last in a slight lull I caught sight of rising

Digitized by Google

ground, and led the party in that direction, where we came into an area of big shell-holes, that is, a planless maze of high ridges and pits where it was impossible to see more than five yards in any direction. I led on, not more than three paces ahead of the next man.

Another whirl of shell-fire came down.

They flung themselves one way into cover, I another.

In a few seconds, when I stood up again, they had vanished.

"Newsom!" I called, not too loud, for this was No Man's Land. No answer.

I circled round, looking for them. They cannot have been more than thirty yards away, but in that noise, darkness and chaos, they were undiscoverable.

At last I gave them up, found a good piece of cover where I could watch in their supposed direction, and waited for something to happen.

In time, the shelling stopped. I wondered where I was, and how to get back through the lines. For all I knew, there might be a German sentry-group three feet away in the next shell-hole. I wasn't even sure which was east and which was west, though I was inclined to think we had missed our way by edging off too far to the right.

My troubles were soon solved for me, when the clouds broke above and I caught a pale

Digitized by Google

glimpse of the Pole Star. Now to apply the invariable rule—east for Germany and west for 'Blighty.' Not for the first time I kept the Pole Star on my right hand and walked straight for home.

Such a long time passed before I came to anything, and so quiet was the night now, that I came to the conclusion I was through the lines and would find nothing till I got to the Canal Bank,[1] but at last I came to a white tape laid out on the ground, leading in my direction. I followed it for ages and ages, seeing and hearing no one. When I thought I must be out of the battlefield the tape ended abruptly not far from a pill-box, to which I went to enquire my way. The man at the door told me it was 'headquarters.'

"What headquarters? Brigade?"

"No, sir, our battalion, of course."

I had walked right up to the door without knowing it; and here came Talbot the Adjutant out to see who I was. Good old Pole Star!

They weren't so pleased with me to-night as they had been yesterday. Talbot was just going up on a tour of inspection and would put me in the way to my company again. In fact, they had collected ten more men of mine and were just sending them off with the company's rations.

[1] The Ypres salient was an arc of which the chord was the Ypres–Comines Canal.

Digitized by Google

The ubiquitous Bridgwater had lost himself too, and drifted into this party. So off we started. More shells sent us picking our way across the valley again, waiting under cover for the likeliest moments.

Talbot, who had a long trip in front of him, sent off the slow-going ration party with an orderly, while we two headed for the crossing of the Stroombeek. I agreed to go round the front line with him. On the slope up towards Winchester we found a section of A company, well forward, dug in and quite happy under a surly, independent corporal. They had been in touch with C company, but had seen nothing of their own for forty-eight hours, during which they had lived on shell-hole water and food from dead men's haversacks. They seemed prepared to stay there as long again. I let Thorburn know that I would return after going round the front. We went on and arrived at last at A company headquarters, to find Newsom also returned safe. Talbot went back, and I stayed to discuss the night's adventures.

There dawn found us, in a little bit of narrow trench partly covered with a sheet of iron ; and there we sat for half an hour or so while a patrol of Boche planes flew backwards and forwards above us firing machine-guns and, attracting what was worse, a rain of splinters on our heads from the British anti-aircraft guns.

Digitized by Google

I determined quite basely to take shelter for a few hours in C company's pill-box, and presently plucked up courage and squattered across through the stream to it.

This pill-box was the only piece of good cover in the whole battalion area. Imagine a small room ten feet square and six feet high with walls of thick rough concrete. There is only one opening, the door, over which a waterproof sheet is draped. The only furniture consists of four bunks made of wire stretched on wooden frames. Signallers and officers' servants have made a little hutch under the lee of the outer wall. Inside, live Marriott and Flint, a serjeant, and as many other people as are thought to deserve refuge. During the day Newsom and Wolfe each pay a visit to get some rest. I come first and stay longest. After all, the headquarters of a front-line company make quite a good command-post for a support company commander, and Thorburn's position is within shouting distance and full view by daylight. On such a little journey had we lost our way last night.

Flint is something in the same exhausted state as myself; Marriott, who came up with Thorburn after the attack, is very cheerful and doing most of the work. Their company is lined up fairly safe in the trench made by the Colonials. Neither trench nor pill-box is under direct observation from the front, though both are visible to the

Digitized by Google

enemy farther over to the right. The open door of the pill-box faces that way.

Marriott welcomed me cordially enough, and found me the dry corner of a bed, where I tried to get an hour's sleep, but with little success. After a time he came into the pill-box, grinning, to ask me to take away some men of mine who were creating a disturbance in his trench. I went out and found the ten ration-carriers of last night all roaring drunk. The poor devils had got lost, just like everyone else, had wandered all night, and finally decided that the company was annihilated. Not without good sense they decided not to starve. They did their best with a whole company's rations, but a whole company's rum defeated them. Hither they had wandered very happy and very sleepy, but rather inclined to sing themselves to sleep.

We saved the rest of the food and rum, and sent over the remains, plenty for my handful of men.

It was difficult to know what to do with these men. One or two were helpless and comatose, one or two were incurably cheerful, the others varied from one extreme to the other. To arrest them and send them down the line would bring shell-fire on them and their escort, besides weakening the outposts. I stormed at them in my severest manner, promising them all courts-martial and death sentences. Some understood me and sobered a little, but Bridgwater and two

Digitized by Google

or three others only blinked and looked more amiable than ever. If I had had any laughter in me I should have burst out laughing, too. We brought most of them round to a condition soon where they could go back to the company. The hopeless cases we left to sleep it off.

There were no shooting parties at dawn, after all, as a sequel to this episode.

During the rest of the day I remained almost entirely in the pill-box. The shell-fire gradually increased as it had done yesterday, but we had no direct hits, any one of which would have done for us. Marriott kept up a running fire of conversation all day, little jokes and reminiscences, sly hints about my company and the rum, comparisons of our men and the Colonials, anecdotes of the day and of old battles. He had a Corporal Higgens as orderly serjeant, in the pill-box with him, one of those professional humorists without whom no company could hang together. The queer turns of his dialect, and an attractive little stuttering in his speech, an acute street-arab sense of humour, combined with the manners and deference of a thorough gentleman, made him perhaps a perfect example of the urban soldier. The stories flowed out of him all day, his adventures with long-forgotten brigadiers, mademoiselles or serjeant-majors, his friends and their idiosyncrasies, love and war and the weather, the bitterness of things, red tape and bad language.

Digitized by Google

(I cannot refrain from quoting 'that our armies swore terribly in Flanders.') He could tell a tale against a staff officer always with tact enough not to scandalise the officers present. If I were Dickens and could write down what he said, my fortune as a novelist would be made. But I'm afraid the jokes that made us reel with laughter would be flat to-day. One jumped at any excuse to be gay, and to laugh meant to forget that open door, facing the wrong way, through which a shell might come at any moment to burst in the midst of us.

One message arrived from headquarters that made the mirth a little more spontaneous. An orderly of my company brought us word that the Berkshires were lending us a company which was to take over the front that night. The rest of us would be reorganised a few hundred yards back. We waited impatiently for dusk. One of our occupations was discussing by the map what was the exact position of this pill-box. At first Flint had taken it for Wellington, but we decided it must be one of two unnamed but suspected ones in the bed of the Stroombeek. Wellington must be near the Colonial trench and shelled to the ground. Then we talked of names for this one, and christened it Flint Castle at last with all due form.

At dusk while we were all ready the orderly arrived again. Where were the Berks? we

Digitized by Google

asked. Not yet come up. But he had brought instead a large rough mongrel sheep dog, trained to carry messages through fire. Marriott grew quite despondent. "I thought they were going to send up the Berkshires," he said, "but all we're going to get now is barks." At which we laughed uproariously. The Berks never did come, but before long a company of another regiment began to arrive. I packed up my stuff and splashed through the stream to Thorburn, who had had another day's shelling and felt a little neglected. We headed back a second time to the jumping-off line, where we were now to be reserve company. Marriott withdrew his men to our position.

As Thorburn and I ploughed through the mud after our men, we passed one of the relieving platoons going forward. Their subaltern gripped me by the arm.

"Who are you? Where are you going? Where's the front line? Have you seen A company?" he asked all in a rush.

"Keep straight on," I answered jauntily, "follow the tape. Your captain's up there. We've just been relieved."

"Don't go!" he said. "Don't leave us! For God's sake, show us the way."

I had met someone more frightened than myself. My confidence came back to me in a moment. This man was in a shivering funk.

Digitized by Google

"God damn it!" I said. "You're all right. You're much stronger than we were. There's a good dugout up there—you can't miss it."

And I shook him off and walked on. I wonder what state that poor devil was in at the end of his tour. But I had only gained a momentary confidence, and before morning was sinking back into the same apathy of suppressed fear as before. We took up our position on the right half of the jumping-off line, quite near headquarters. There were about twenty-seven men to organise in four sections, and place in the best shell-holes. For company headquarters Serjeant Walker, Thorburn and I found an old incomplete pill-box called on the map Cluster House. It was one of those early German efforts made of concrete on the western and of wood on the eastern side, so that in case of capture it would give no cover against German shell-fire. But it gave shelter from the rain, and here we settled. To make some amends to Thorburn for the twenty-four hours he had taken alone, I sent him to battalion headquarters to sleep, where they found him a corner of some kind. Walker took the top bunk in the little room, I took the lower one, but could only doze for an hour or two, in spite of the fact that I had not had eight hours' sleep out of the last ninety. It was very cold and I was acutely aware of my wet knees. At the first sign of dawn I got up and tried to clean myself

Digitized by Google

A DUCKBOARD TRACK IN THE SALIENT

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

up a little. Again it was a raw, misty morning. Before long two gunner officers arrived to use the house as an observation-post from which to direct a few rounds of shell-fire, but luckily brought no retaliation. We talked to them and shared breakfast of tea and bread and jam.

It seemed so quiet this morning that head-quarters sent us orders to do salvage work. The wounded had all been brought in ; the stretcher-bearers were collecting and burying the dead ; I sent men to help in this and to collect arms and equipment. But during the morning it rained once more, and at times there was some shell-fire, at which the poor wretched men returned to their shell-holes. They got the worst of the weather ; but we in our wooden shed right on the skyline soon began to attract the shells. The Colonials on our right were expecting trouble. Suddenly a signal went up, three little lights pale against the rainy sky, red and green and white. It was the S O S. Then both barrages fell and the 'crumps' burst all about the valley. Only whizzbangs came near us, but bullets would have pierced our wooden walls. Though it turned out to be a false alarm, the artillery never altogether died away, and as the afternoon wore on, the enemy's guns searched the Stroombeek valley and the ridge whereon we were. Luckily the men in the open lower down the slope were in little danger.

Digitized by Google

§ 5

Pill-boxes had begun by being concreted cellars in farm houses; they grew gradually into keeps of reinforced concrete in the midst of the wreckage of ruined houses; in the third stage the ruins were scattered by shell-fire and the square boxes of concrete were left standing alone. We had found in the vestibule of this mansion a little kennel door leading to a tiny cellar perhaps six feet in each dimension, half its depth being below ground-level. This closet was concreted over, and being watertight, had naturally filled up to ground-level with rain-water. At some time or other it had been used as a latrine, and the smell from it was prodigious.

When a second time the S O S was sent up (as far as we could see, without reason) and again our barrage fell and the German retaliation came crashing round us, I began to look for cover. A near whizzbang decided me. Smell or no smell, I would explore the funkhole. I crawled in and found a ledge round the kennel and a few boards just above water-level stretched across the corners. It was safe from anything less than a direct hit from a 5·9. But if I let my hand drop carelessly or hung my foot over the edge of the board it fell into two feet of stagnant green water, fetid and slimy sewage. The smell of it was midway between a septic tank and a tidal river

Digitized by Google

in an industrial town, and it had a staleness all its own.

Thorburn almost jeered when I crept into this tank, but when later in the evening a third S O S. went up from the Colonials, and the shells fell closer than ever, Serjeant Walker and I went to earth together, and before long Thorburn swallowed his pride and joined us.

To-night the battalion was to be relieved. We were already far enough back not to be continually on the alert. We sat and waited from seven o'clock till midnight crouched on boards, this dank pool three inches from the seats of our trousers and the roof three inches above our heads. There was nothing to do. An excursion or two showed that the men were not under fire. We exchanged a few messages with headquarters about the relief. We sat and talked, sticking a candle-end on a ledge to light up the slime on the damp walls and our own unshaven faces. One caller came to us, 'Davy' Jones, a little racecourse tout, a man of unlimited impudence, a singer of scurrilous songs, owner of the company Crown and Anchor board, always in trouble, but always well forward in action.

For once he was beat. He had been to headquarters on some errand or other (we had made him an acting section leader) and was standing in the little trench outside when two 5·9's came over together and burst on the parapet. With

Digitized by Google

that curious uncertainty of shell-fire, they had almost blown the ground from under his feet without hurting him. But he was badly shaken and had lost his impudence. We brought him into our funkhole and made a fuss of him until the shelling was over.

We soon fell into a sentimental conversation,

> 'Of old unhappy far-off things
> And battles long ago.'

Jones and I talked of our old fights, of Ovillers and Gommecourt and the good times in summer out at rest, and of the friends who had 'drawn their full issue' long before. It was Stanley that never left my mind. Although it seems a trivially selfish way to think of his death, it was the discomfort of his absence that made me think the more of his loss. He had been a part of my life for eighteen months, and through these four days I had been helpless without him. Now that we had an opportunity to think clearly, I began to realise how much was lost to me.

The element of comedy about him made his tragedy the sadder. I remembered the fights we had fought together, Ovillers where he had given me half his water when we were all parched in the July heat, Pozières where we had lived a day and a night in one 'cubby-hole' eating from the same dish, Epéhy where we wandered together among falling shells and driving snow.

Digitized by Google

But more characteristic and sadder now was his grotesque face with 'a smile that went up sideways, from the corner of his nostril,' and I thought of his stolen ride to Amiens in my best breeches, and his cutting off the heads and cooking the stalks of the asparagus that I had gathered under shell-fire.

He had said to me a dozen times, "Why, the shell 'aint made yet with my name on it, sir."

It had always been his way to tell pointed little stories about his own behaviour in action, for he always called himself a coward, but, as I remembered, it was his advice that I had always valued most in action, and advising me the bolder course he had been killed.

I thought how recently it was he had told me of his brother's death in action.

"Ar! 'E was a good kid, was Stanley," said Jones. "An' so was young Greenwood, and Fred Smith an' all. They was good lads, all on 'em."

There was another thing weighing on my mind as well. I began to realise that I had vaguely left a Lewis-gun section with the 16th Battalion at Winchester. Several times it had occurred to me to send for them, but I had not done so. Serjeant Walker and I were the only two men who knew their exact position, and it would be very irregular for either of us to go. Somehow, I could not make up my mind to send any of my

Digitized by Google

tired handful over that dreary mile of mud under heavy fire to look for one particular shell-hole among a thousand exactly like it. I knew the 16th, to whom they were attached, would look after them, but felt very guilty nevertheless, because they had only stayed there by my own unofficial arrangement.

My anxiety was not relieved when I learnt afterwards that they left the front line with the 16th later in the night under a heavy bombardment, which the rest of us, starting earlier, had avoided. We got back safely, but their section commander, third in four days to hold that position, was killed and another man was wounded. It seemed to me sometimes that this man's blood was on my head. But as yet I could only trust that they were not forgotten and leave them to the 16th. I sent them no message.

At last our relief came. Section by section the relieving regiment arrived and replaced each of my groups with a platoon. Thorburn saw to the section reliefs; it was my place to 'hand over' company headquarters and explain the tactical situation. Each party moved off as it was relieved, till at last Serjeant Walker and I were left alone. Reporting at battalion headquarters as we passed, we moved over the hill towards St. Julien. I was full of anxiety to cross the Steenbeek and get away, being terribly frightened

Digitized by Google

of being hit now at the last minute. We passed the Winnipeg road and the old Langemarck trench line, left on our right Janet Farm, where the doctor plied his trade, then crossed the little bridge over the Steenbeek among the rusting remains of twenty-two tanks lying dead in the bottom of the valley, and reached the road, where at last there was a firm foothold to find unless you trod in a shell-hole. This road was subject to sudden gusts of shelling, but none came. Columns of mules and wagons with ammunition passed us going up to the batteries in safety. As we got up towards Vanheule Farm a few shells fell lower down the road. But here there was a pill-box, and—thank God—a soup kitchen. We drank thick soup out of old jam-tins and moved on. The company was still all in front of us, though we could travel much faster than they. Our destination was Irish Farm, and we had only the sketchiest idea where it lay.

We were just out on the road again when two or three 5·9's fell, searching along it. The nearest was very close. A motor lorry standing there jammed in its clutch and started hell-for-leather. Walker leapt to one side, I to the other.

"Let's get on board!" I shouted to him. Yelling at the driver to give us a lift, I sprang on the footboard as the lorry thundered past. Another shell crashed down. The lorry jolted

Digitized by Google

on, taking shell-holes at a flying leap, doing twelve or fifteen miles an hour in black darkness. When we had gone two or three hundred yards out of danger, I discovered that I was the only passenger. Serjeant Walker must have been too slow. So I deserted him.

"Where are you going?" I asked the driver. "Anywhere near Irish Farm?"

"No, sir. St. Jean."

"Which way is Irish Farm?"

"Down Admiral's Road. Just here on the right." The corner of Admiral's Road was perhaps the most dangerous cross-roads in the salient. I dismounted and hovered about in terror, waiting for Walker, as the lorry had only taken me a few hundred yards. But he never came, and I wandered down that grisly road alone, hugging the side of it and ready to jump into the ditch if anything came over. As far as I remember, I met nothing but a solitary tank crawling stridently, uncannily towards the front.

A mile down the road other groups of men came in sight, and at last a redcap[1] at a corner guiding the converging parties towards a road leading to the left. Before long a little track led into an open field where bivouac sheets were being raised in rough grass. There was no elation of victory. Silently rum was issued

[1] A military policeman.

Digitized by Google

and the companies settled down for the night. Serjeant Walker and all my stragglers came in.

Cold, damp and utterly despondent I crept into my valise and slept.

For my part in this battle I was given the Military Cross and a captaincy. I had expected a court-martial.

* * *

Casualties to the Battalion :

Killed ..	4 officers,	81 other ranks.
Wounded	6 officers,	171 other ranks.
	10	252

The total, 262, being about half of those who took part in the battle. At this stage of the war, in order to avoid the disproportionate death-rate among officers, only sixteen per battalion went into action. This time ten were hit. My company set out with three officers, seventeen N.C.O.'s and ninety-two men. One officer, two N.C.O.'s and forty-four men survived the attack unhurt.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER V

1917—1919

THE END OF A SUBALTERN'S WAR

How different were the days spent in rest after Passchendaele, from the happy holidays which succeeded the Battle of the Somme, a year before. One no longer had a boy's resilience. Two winters in the trenches had struck a chill into our bones. Heart and nerve and sinew had served their turn, and were most unwilling to be forced into further service. It was hard to build up B company again when the old comrades were scattered at last. With a kind of apathy we set to work, only spurred on a little by medals and promotion, to re-create the old tradition; and grew in time as fond of the new as of the old company. War had become so normal an activity that one's mental horizon was bounded by the British front in France and the interval before next spring with its new battles. World-politics swept over our heads unnoticed, and the future meant nothing to men living in daily expectation of death.

We went into cushy trenches near the Vimy

Digitized by Google

Ridge, where there had been no fighting for six months. This was good training for our new recruits, who only needed to be 'shot over' before they became fit for the next adventure, which, when it came, shook us out of our apathy. We were sent off to Italy to repair the disaster which the Italians had suffered at the Battle of Caporetto. A five days' train journey through new and friendly lands, a week of marching through the plains of Lombardy in fine frosty weather, made so complete a change that as I led my company, singing 'Where the Swanee River flows,' through a village near Verona, and a friendly Staff officer called me by name from a window, shouting, "Good! Damned good marching! The best in the brigade," my heart swelled with pride, as if 1915 had come again.

During the winter of 1917–1918 we moved about behind the Italian front in reserve positions, seeing no more of the war than an occasional reconnaissance of the Alpine front and a few air-raids on the plains. Though I did not suspect it, the war had ended for me. Early in 1918 I was given long leave, which I spent simply and happily with cousins who did war-work in London, and after a train of accidents was sent to a reserve battalion in England, where I remained for the rest of the war. Here one's motives were strangely mixed. England was beastly in

Digitized by Google

1918; it was in the hands of the dismal and incompetent. Pessimism raged among those who knew nothing of the war; 'défaitisme,' the desire to stop the war at all costs, even by the admission of defeat, broke out among the faint-hearts; while those at home who still had the will to fight preferred to use the most disgusting means —to fight by lying propaganda, and by imitating the bad tradition of the German army which consistently made war against civilians. No wonder that a genuine and silent pacifism was rising in the breast of the war-weary populations. Envy, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness, fear and cruelty born of fear, seemed the dominant passions of the leaders of the nations in those days. Only in the trenches (on both sides of No Man's Land) were chivalry and sweet reasonableness to be found. How delightful was the comradeship of the trenches compared with the petty jealousy of a reserve battalion, where the staple conversation turned on the methods one's neighbours used to avoid being sent to France. In such a place the keen soldiers were inclined to form a coterie and affect a superior knowledge of world affairs. The temporaries waiting to go out with a draft of men to the trenches would despise the permanent staff, dug in, 'embusqué' as the French said, in safe places in England; yet who knew in his heart which was the happier state: which 'embusqué' would give his soul

Digitized by Google

to go abroad, which of the others to stay at home?

At first I was downright glad to have a dry bed and a whole skin, but unrest soon seized me. Boredom was succeeded by a longing to be 'with the lads.' I shrank from the trenches, and then pulled strings at the War Office to get sent back to them. Meanwhile I shared a hut with a musician who had drifted into the army although he was a pacifist. He assured me he would never fire a shot or strike a blow, even in self-defence, though he had no objection to dying for his country and was, strangely, in spite of his views, a good officer. We decorated our room with impressionist pictures, and read learned books. I remember we rejoiced together over Bradley's 'Shakespearean Tragedy.' Then he was 'sent out on a draft' and immediately killed. I have no doubt he devoted himself to death.

I sat alone in the hut, not caring much (it was too late in the war to mind a death), and sat down to write. Then the first draft of this memoir took shape, but mostly I wrote essays on tactics and read all the military experts in all the newspapers. There were also bad romantic verses about death and the trenches and men I had served with two years ago.

When in the summer my regiment fought a battle in the Alps, I grew directly anxious to

Digitized by Google

rejoin them, and pestered the higher command with applications. As the autumn came on I was afraid of coming too late, quite dreading the thought of missing the final victory. Not till a few days before the Armistice did my orders come, and I got to Italy as the war ended.

After the Armistice there were strange doings among the armies which waited six months to be demobilised. To throw so powerful a machine out of high gear into neutral, neither stops its progress nor makes it easy to control. Life was pointless, and very few soldiers were lucky enough to know in what direction their lives would tend. Millions of young men had known no other career, no other destiny than battle. It was rather like the second act of 'Othello,' where a gentleman enters crying: 'News, lads, our wars are done.' What then? For a long time there was nothing adequate to the occasion but for 'every man to put himself into triumph, some to dance, some to make bonfires, each man, to what sport and revels his addiction leads him; or to sing with Iago:

> 'A soldier's a man;
> A life's but a span;
> Why, then, let a soldier drink!'

Many of us were quite indifferent to the future. Even after being demobilised the subject of this memoir did nothing and thought very

Digitized by Google

little for some weeks, until upon a Tuesday the spirit moved him to go to Oxford, and on the Friday he exchanged the fourth for the fifth age, to be not a man of action but a mere purveyor of criticisms.

> 'Full of wise saws and modern instances,
> And so he plays his part.'

Digitized by Google

EPILOGUE

AN ESSAY ON MILITARISM

THROUGHOUT Europe the phrases 'before the war' and 'since the war' are among the commonest on men's lips. They are used to divide the age into three periods, the world of men into three generations.

Middle-aged men, strenuously as they attempt to deny it, are united by a secret bond and separated by a mental barrier from their fellows who were too old or too young to fight in the Great War. Particularly the generation of young men who were soldiers before their characters had been formed, who were under twenty-five in 1914, is conscious of the distinction, for the war made them what they are. Generally speaking, this secret army presents to the world a front of silence and bitterness. Loath to speak of their experience, if they speak, it is with a sort of rough cynicism which it has become fashionable to describe as disillusion, disenchantment. A legend has grown up, propagated not by soldiers but by journalists, that these men who went gaily to fight in the mood of Rupert Brooke and Julian

Digitized by Google

Grenfell, lost their faith amid the horrors of the trenches and returned in a mood of anger and despair. To calculate the effect of mental and bodily suffering, not on a man but on a whole generation of men, may seem an impossible task, but it can at least be affirmed that the legend of disenchantment is false.

It is based first on the belief that soldiers in the trenches endured such things as men have never before known, that passing through the fire they were destroyed or purified in some strange way, a belief that will not bear a moment's examination. Any broad view of human life squares with the homely saying of Mercy in the 'Pilgrim's Progress': 'Well, you know your sore and I know mine; and, good friend, we shall all have enough evil before we come at our journey's end.' A rash man only would affirm that the scars of war are more terrible than any others of the 'thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.' What is remarkable about war is that its blows fall not on individuals but on groups. Outrageous fortune who strikes one man with the pangs of despised love, another with the oppressor's wrong, dealing such blows that only the sufferer can tell their weight, showers on the heads of multitudes in war, danger and discomfort which all her victims must bear. The deeper a spiritual experience goes the more difficult it is to communicate its meaning to

Digitized by Google

another person. Those who have not known passionate love or passionate religion are generally unable to appreciate them and sometimes doubt their existence; but lovers or religious mystics feel for one another. They have an inner life in common. In the same way, though in a lesser degree, soldiers who have fought side by side are conscious of being initiated: they are 'illuminati.' It is important, too, to remember that not only unpleasant emotions have thus been shared. If we have known fear and discomfort we have also felt courage and comfort well up in our hearts, springing from the crowd-emotion of our company, for even Active Service brings moments of intense happiness. Mr. Sassoon caught and fixed such a glowing instant in his poem about the soldiers singing on the march.

'Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
And beauty came like the setting sun:
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
Drifted away. . . . O but everyone
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.'

Further, it is not honest to deny the existence of happiness which was actually derived from the war. First, the horrors and the discomforts, indescribable as they are, were not continuous. The unluckiest soldiers, whose leave was always stopped, who never had a 'blighty' wound,

Digitized by Google

still spent only a comparatively few days in the face of the enemy, and of these only a few were of the most horrible kind. Their intensity, when they came, sharpened the senses and made the intervals correspondingly delightful. If no man now under thirty can guess the meaning of twenty-four hours' bombardment, nor has he any notion of the joy of ninety-six hours' rest. Who has never been drenched and frozen in Flanders mud, has never dreamed of the pleasure derivable from dry blankets on a stone floor. Secondly, it must be remembered that men like adventures. Anyone who has ever been through a street accident, anyone who has climbed a mountain, knows that. It is one of the strange attributes of the mind that we like things which make our flesh creep, and no one was very long at the front without sometimes feeling a thrill of excitement which quite banished the dragging fears of anticipation. Quite late in the war I have seen a man go to spend the afternoon in a trench under heavy shell-fire because he was bored with sitting in a safe dugout. Thirdly, there was comradeship, richer, stronger in war than we have ever known since.

'From quiet homes, and first beginning,
Out to the undiscovered ends,
There's nothing worth the wear of winning,
But laughter and the love of friends.'

Digitized by Google

About these sensations soldiers have been tongue-tied. The literary fashion in war books was set in 1917 by M. Henri Barbusse, who would not allow any redeeming features in a soldier's life. In England it was Mr. C. E. Montague whose charming book 'Disenchantment' struck a key in which later writers have remained without reproducing his kindly humour. For the most part war books with any pretence to analysis of character and motive seem to have been written by acidulated Radicals whose philanthropy is of a sort to sour the milk of human kindness. The typical soldier has held his tongue, vaguely disliking the character that has been thrust on him. He was not at all like the jaded individualist described in the works of the school of disillusion. He was a social animal undergoing a particularly social experience. However, the unhappy individualists got the publicity. Even so pronounced an individualist as Colonel Lawrence at the height of his glory was conscious of the strange power of attraction which lies in a common soldier's life, an attraction which prompted many a young officer in the later years of the war to wish he could renounce his rank and identify himself still more closely with the men. 'It came upon me freshly,' thought Lawrence after living among the Arab irregulars, 'how the secret of uniform was to make a crowd solid, dignified, impersonal: to

Digitized by Google

give it the singleness and tautness of an upstanding man. . . . About the soldiers hung the Arabs: gravely gazing men from another sphere. My crooked duty had banished me among them for two years. To-night I was nearer to them than to the troops and I resented it as shameful.'

Even Herr Erich Remarque, the author of that highly coloured romance, 'All Quiet on the Western Front,' found his only spiritual home in the trenches, disgusting and contemptible though the characters in his story are. Some of us, like his countryman Otto Braun, kept better company, and faced facts without losing all sense of decency.

War is a very old trade of which the working principles have long been laid down. It is much easier to scoff at esprit de corps and military discipline than it is to deny their efficacy. Discipline is still, as Carlyle said, a miracle which works by faith. To be bound by an oath to the performance of a task; to carry it out with ritual and ceremony; to hold an exact place in a hierarchy, are natural undertakings for all men, and delightful to many. That the task may be irksome, the ritual silly and the officer feeble makes very little difference. Human nature responds to that sort of organisation, which is employed in universities and parliaments and lodges of Freemasons with similar intention; but not so efficiently as in armies, where the rules are

Digitized by Google

more completely developed by long experience. One remembers the happy speech of the centurion in the Gospel, so clear in his duty to his men and to those above him: 'Lord, I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth: and to another, Come, and he cometh.' I know my place and rejoice in it.

Post-war problems, too, are familiar in human experience. A very little general knowledge will suggest how ordinary are the lassitude, exhaustion, and pessimism, the obsessions and the hysterical fits from which men suffer after the conclusion of a great war. The United States after the Civil War went through just such a phase, from which some of the Southern States have hardly yet emerged. A famous chapter in the third book of Thucydides contains an account of such a condition. That great part of European literature produced under the shadow of the Wars of Religion is infused by this reaction against war, which forms the subject of Don Quixote, and explains the meaning of 'Julius Cæsar,' even of 'Henry V,' which is by no means a jingo play. This does not imply that the particular brand of anti-militarism fashionable at the present day can be deduced from Shakespeare or Cervantes, but only that these writers were lovers of peace because they had seen war, not because they were facile optimists who believed that its causes

Digitized by Google

could be removed by an Act of Parliament. By experience they had learned that war is the worst possible way of settling a difficulty. This was well expressed by good old King George III, who said: 'Let any war be ever so successful, if persons will only sit down and weigh the expenses, they will find it has impoverished the state, enriched individuals, and perhaps raised the name only of the conquerors.' In fact, war is a wasteful and unpleasant occupation which rarely produces decisive results.

A second common belief about the Great War is that it inflicted on the soldiers worse horrors than had previously been imagined, a belief which presumably accounts for the illogical attempts of some humanitarians to forbid the use of certain weapons of war as too horrible. All wars fought to a finish between well-matched combatants are equally cruel, whether they are fought with bows and arrows or with poison gas. War has three horrors—discomfort, fear and death. To the last of these three the ingenuities of science make no difference, nor can body and mind stand more discomfort or more terror than they could stand five hundred years ago. At a certain point the strain becomes so great that one army or the other collapses and gives in. There is no evidence for supposing that this breaking-point is not what it always was, nor the limits of endurance just the same. Victory

Digitized by Google

depends on endurance, not on brutality: those who bear the greatest suffering survive, and it is this which supplies the heroic element even in modern war. A patriot in 1916 might still rejoice in being able to repay some of his debt to England:

> 'Then I thanked God that now I had suffered pain
> And, as the parched plain, thirst, and lain awake
> Shivering all night through till cold daybreak:
> In that I count these sufferings my gain
> And her acknowledgment. Nay, more, would fain
> Suffer as many more for her sweet sake.'

It is this feeling which inspired Haig's famous 'back-to-the-wall' message to the troops in 1918: 'Many of us are now tired. To those I would say that victory belongs to the side which holds out the longest.' In its moral aspect war resembles other great tragedies: the greater the horror, the nobler the triumph of the man who is not morally ruined by it.

I have no patience with those prophets who denounce war on account of the discomfort of the trenches, who gloat over the mud and the cold, the filth and the disease, making them the principal charges against the decency of a soldier's life. What in the world do such things matter, and, if any unworldly consideration be taken, how they sink into nothingness? This is the charge laid by the comfortable folk, who hate war because

Digitized by Google

it shakes them out of their routine ; who have no sense of comradeship and no sense of adventure ; who sit in armchairs glowing with vicarious pride over the hardships endured by Arctic explorers or shipwrecked sailors, and squeal when such hardships come their own way. These are the folk whose motto is ' Safety First,' who never run a risk or take a sporting chance ; who never think how many men every day endure heat and cold, hunger, thirst and exposure, willingly and gladly to secure for them the blessings of comfort ; who hate war because it makes them live as miners, fo'c'sle hands or night-watchmen live in time of peace. One of their favourite complaints is the compulsion to see gruesome sights, such as a medical student sees with indifference. Not in that namby-pamby genteel affectation did Mark Antony protest against the foul deed that smelt

' above the earth
With carrion men groaning for burial.'

One inevitable result of war is the death of many young men who might well have expected to live longer. Since to attain a rational attitude of mind towards death is the chief problem of human life, we may well consider the case of the young soldier who became acquainted with the problem earlier in life than is usual. Although we all know that we are seated at play with an opponent who is certain to checkmate in something

Digitized by Google

less than three score and ten moves, the end seems so remote to most lads of eighteen that they don't really believe in it. Yet earthly life is a losing game which is to be played out with what propriety we can manage, and which should be lost without rancour. Soldiers learn to live and die in that fashion. It is virtuous and not vicious to be indifferent to death, provided that you are as indifferent to your own as to your neighbour's. Religious faith is rarely so strong as to support a man against selfish mourning when death takes his friends; but military honour, when it teaches him to go to his own death with a smile, helps him to a little virtue. To die young is by no means an unmitigated misfortune; to die gaily in the unselfish pursuit of what you believe to be a righteous cause is an enviable and not a premature end. Cardinal Mercier expressed this thought still more violently when he said: "How many of these young men who in the impulse of patriotism had the resolution to die well, might possibly not have had the resolution to live well"; and as we survivors of the war pass into a sordid unheroic middle age, it is not pity that we feel for those who died on the field of honour. God grant that we may be as lucky in the occasion of our death, and may meet it with a soldier's gay courage.

Fear is the worst of the horrors of war. Fear is that which degrades, which breeds cruelty, envy

Digitized by Google

and malice ; and fear is the enemy in war. The merit of discipline is that it strengthens the nerve of every man by filling him with the general courage. Just as a panicstricken mob is baser and more cowardly than any one of its members, so a disciplined regiment is nobler and braver. Unhappy is that man in war who is not sensitive to crowd-emotion, for he bears the weight of war on his own shoulders alone. To such a man war is indeed a nightmare. A cynical French statesman, being asked whether the French army could hold out in 1918, is reported to have answered, " Mais oui, pourvu que les civils tiennent." The strain of war was more likely to break the civilians, who were not disciplined, not united and sustained by esprit de corps. Luckily they were not put to so severe a test as the soldiers ; but what they endured, they endured singly, man by man. And they knew only the horrors of war, only the fear, the hatred, the pain and the discomfort ; they never saw the comradeship and the mutual support without which the men in the trenches could not have survived a single day. Even in relation to the enemy the spirit of the trenches was more humane than the spirit behind the lines. Atrocity stories were not fabricated at the front. That duty which compels you to kill a man does not compel you to hate him. Of the two, hating is the worse lapse from humanity.

Digitized by Google

It was behind the lines among war correspondents, hospital attendants and base camp officials that the weakening of morale was first seen. Some persons in England who had nourished the belief that war was something like the Royal Military Tournament were shaken in that belief by the books which began to issue from the press about the year 1917. One of the most striking of these books was 'Mr. Britling Sees it Through,' a topical novel by Mr. H. G. Wells, describing the feelings of a literary man in England during the war. It ought to have been called 'Mr. Wells does not see it through,' since it reflected nothing but the weakening of the author's resolution. Mr. Britling entered upon the war period in a heroic spirit which lasted just so long as he imagined that war meant victory without sacrifice. Confronted by the calamities and misfortunes of 1916, Mr. Britling lost his nerve and became a flabby and verbose 'défaitiste,' not a true pacifist, merely a man who thought that fine words would solve practical problems. Mr. Britling's politics were sillier in 1917 even than they had been in 1914. It is just possible that the phrasemakers might have prevented the war by a formula, but it was no time for phrases when men and nations were locked in a life-and-death struggle. No one now remembers that present-day pacifists were almost all militarists in 1914 and are now being wise

Digitized by Google

after the event. How far distant from our present understanding are those August days when the Germans were marching into Belgium, and even Mr. Wells was writing columns of Chauvinist abuse against them in the daily papers and fancying himself a military expert. In those days there were no two opinions about the war. Life presented a simple duty ; for once the plain practical issue coincided with the high moral issue ; here was a task to be done, a Herculean task, but one that could luckily be attempted without hesitations or doubts. All good and honourable men were agreed about it. It turned out not to be a pleasant task, but we set our hands to it and we did it. At the end the game seemed to have been hard and the prize small. We did not find the burdens of life eased after our efforts. No golden age of virtue triumphant and vice defeated rewarded our toil, but then I do not remember that we ever expected such results. In the dark days of 1917, when the grimmest struggles took place, when no eye could see a glimmer of light, when all pity was ' choked with custom of fell deeds,' the weaklings began to fall away. Then the unorganised nations fell into ruins and then the undisciplined characters failed at the test. An irrational cry, like the cry of a hurt child, against the harshness of the world, broke from the over-sensitive and the tempera-mental, but once begun the agony had to be

Digitized by Google

endured. They who had permitted the war to start must see it out to an end. Luckily for England the 'défaitistes' were few and feeble, which by no means implies that the others were enjoying the war. They were not 'disillusioned'; they were just 'fed up.' There was never in the British armies and navies a suggestion of that mutinous 'défaitisme' which ruined Russia, Germany and Austria, which threatened Italy and France. As to the rights and wrongs of the struggle, the attitude of the common Englishman had not changed since 1914. He had not wanted war, but he had engaged in it; he liked it even less than he expected, but he proposed to see it through; and if, which God forbid, similar circumstances arose in 1929, he would do the same again. As the soldiers grew war-weary, so their doggedness grew. In fact, the end of the war was the test of character. Any weakling might be a fighter when the war began; but if a man had a yellow streak in him the prolongation of the war brought it to light.

In trying to picture to myself this past age of the Great War, I find it hardest to reproduce the year 1919, the maddest year of all. This was the moment of disenchantment. The spell which had bound us for such a long time was broken; the charm failed; an illusion came crashing down about our ears and left us in an unfamiliar world—our fairy gold turned to dust and ashes. Many

Digitized by Google

men who were in the face of the enemy on November 11th relate that the news of the Armistice was received with cold indifference, most unlike the enthusiasm it caused in London. Millions of men keyed up to an unnatural pitch of determination found the tension relaxed so suddenly as to throw them off their balance. It was long before they resumed a civilian's sense of time. To a soldier in the war it became second nature to live for the present. When pleasures were few they were snatched and enjoyed with an intensity such as no civilians knew. Respite for a week or a day from the fear of death gave absolute enjoyment, for a week or a day. The future had for so long meant only a series of trips up the line, punctuated by short paradisal intervals of rest in each of which you laughed and drank in a company of whom some would probably be dead in a month, and the others in a year, that to survive the next tour in the trenches, to enjoy one more spell in rest-billets, perhaps to get one more week's leave in England, were all the ambitions and hopes that life could offer, the farthest rim of the horizon being bounded by 'next spring offensive.' The coming age 'after the war,' if it ever entered your thoughts, was as vague as heaven and much more remote. After the war anything might happen. When it came to be 'after the war' you hardly knew what to make of it. Friends were parted. Life seemed large

Digitized by Google

and empty. You had to earn a living. It was not easy to begin again, to take thought for the morrow when you had not expected to be alive for it. Then arose false prophets crying, 'Lo here' and 'Lo there.' You were the saviour of your country, which must at once be converted into utopia for your benefit. You were a fool ever to have fought in the war at all. You were a rotter who had acquired habits of idleness and insobriety in the King's service. All this was very confusing for a soldier lad who had picked up his education in a strange school, who had borne burdens which these prophets would not touch with their little fingers, and whose moral fibre was strained and tired. Disillusion came in with peace, not with war; peace at first was the futile state. In war a man did at least know what he was at; all activity was directed towards a fixed object; but peace seemed to lead nowhere: it was anticlimax. Such sensations cannot have been felt by those who were already middle-aged, but these formed a small proportion of the soldiers in the trenches. For the most part all the armies were recruited from the very young, who were allowed to have the taste of death in their mouths for two years before the law held them to be adults fitted for the burden of life.

If the whole series of events from 1914 to 1919 was a futility, and an unpleasant one at that, leading nowhere, why were we such fools as to

Digitized by Google

take part in it? The answer, simple enough at the time though not so obvious in retrospect, was because there was absolutely no other course open to a plain, honest man. Did we or our fathers make the war, plan it or desire it? By no means. We found ourselves engaged in it exactly as a man finds himself in a shipwreck. When the S O S rockets go up from the bridge, when the boats are being manned, when the deck is awash, then is the time for courage, discipline and silence; to take one's place and obey orders. It is not really helpful to criticise the captain and the crew for their present or for their past conduct. If the ordeal of the passengers is prolonged we shall learn who are the stout fellows by their staying power, when the weaklings turn to panic or to mutiny, or at least to futile bewailings and complaints. When all is over and the weaklings have been saved by harsh measures of which they disapproved, it is very easy to lay the blame for the disaster on the captain or on the designers of the ship; and this is again what the weaklings will be ready to do, showing no more generosity after the test than they did nobility during its crisis. Some honest self-examination will show that responsibility for a shipwreck can never be shifted entirely on to the shoulders of the captain. The Board of Trade makes certain regulations; Trinity House sets up sailing marks; the shipping company has responsibilities, all of which reduce

Digitized by Google

unnecessary risk to a minimum; and if these precautions are overlooked, the travelling public, wise and foolish, brave and cowardly, are to blame. But with all the precautions in the world there are yet certain risks against which insurance cannot be effected. Act of God or the King's enemies may still bring a calamity in which courage and discipline will be the only safeguards. If a man puts to sea in a leaky ship under an inefficient captain, he must blame himself for ensuing disaster; if he sails in a sound ship under a good captain and is wrecked by the unforeseen, no man need take the blame.

Europe suffered in 1914 from too many citizens who were careless of the risks when the ship lay in port and panicked when it ran into a storm; who voted for existing governments, ridiculing the chance of war until war came, and then tried to blame the governments for it; who were pacifists in 1911, militarists in 1914 and pacifists again in 1917; who were silly in one way at the beginning, in another way at the middle, and excelled themselves by silly talk about 'disenchantment' when the war was over.

Very different from these feeble folk were the true pacifists. There were of course some people, the Quakers for example, who had the courage (and very great courage was required) to denounce all forms of violence, all resistance to an enemy. A few, a very few, were converted to this doctrine

Digitized by Google

of non-resistance by the effect of war. Looking at the world in 1929, it is not apparent that the number of pacifists of this colour is much increased. Numerous persons of middle age and over are still so frightened by the events of fifteen years ago that they would vote for any politician who promised to avoid wars ; but they have no objection to violence used at a distance, in Mexico for example, or on the North-west frontier of India, or by policemen against burglars : in fact, they are cowards not pacifists.

The conclusion of these remarks seems to be the same brand of pessimism which Shelley proclaimed in another post-war period a hundred years ago.

> 'O Cease! Must Hate and Death return?
> Cease! Must men kill and die?
> Cease! Drain not to its dregs the urn
> Of bitter prophecy!
> The World is weary of the past—
> O might it die or rest at last!'

We must face the fact that death is inevitable and hate lamentably common. Not one of the statesmen who catches votes by making pacts and promises about peace omits to abuse either one or other of our possible rivals among the nations. Nor is the younger generation any better than the old. Pugnacity and partisan strife are quite as natural as formerly, and the

Digitized by Google

enthusiasms, shall we say, of 1926, do not differ in quality from those of 1914, though directed towards other ends. To the men who grew up just too late to take part in the war, inheriting only the chaos and divided aims of the post-war years, to these individualists we, their elder brothers, are an enigma. They think that we are coarsened, brutalised and banded together by an impossible faith, a forgotten loyalty. We only did exactly what they would have done, and having done it we have learned to understand one another if no one else in the world.

Can war be prevented? Yes, of course it can. We shall cease to fight to the death so soon as we rid our hearts of envy, hatred and malice. Since this seems improbable at the moment, can war be avoided in the present circumstances? Yes, we can take precautions just as we take them against shipwreck. Among these will not be found vote-catching treaties, abuse of friendly nations, jeers and sneers against the police work done by soldiers and sailors, misrepresentation of the facts about war, nor any of the seven-devils which may enter in when the devil of militarism is driven out.

1929 A.D.

Digitized by Google

PASSCHENDAELE: BEFORE AND AFTER

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

APPENDIX A

NOTE ON TRENCH WARFARE

To be able to picture a soldier's life in France it is necessary to understand some of the principles of trench fighting which took so large a part in the Great War. It has commonly been thought that the last war differed from all others in this respect, but the truth is that in the middle period of every great war there is likely to be some such deadlock, as our grandfathers knew when they considered the trenches before Sebastopol, and our great-grandfathers the lines of Torres Vedras. The Great War on the Western front began like most other wars with a period of open fighting, when cavalry were employed on horseback and battles were short and sharp. It then passed into a period of stalemate, when infantry and guns burrowed underground and hammered at one another in prolonged trench-to-trench battles. In reality the period of fixed trench warfare was not so long as has been generally supposed. The lines were rigid only in 1915 and 1916.

There was immense variation between one sector of front and another. The British front can be distinguished into two parts : in the north

Digitized by Google

the water-logged plains of Flanders and Artois, in the south the chalk downs of Picardy, drained by the Somme and its tributaries. Trenches, properly speaking, could not long exist in Flanders, where the country is scientifically irrigated by many little water-courses. When these were damaged by shell-fire the countryside rapidly turned into a morass in which it was impossible to dig. During a battle in Flanders men lived in muddy shell-holes which always tended to fill up with water. During the days of fixed trench warfare the best positions in these parts were breastworks, behind which a man could hide, thick and high walls, built up of 'sandbags' which are small sacks filled with clay and laid in courses like bricks. Farther to the south in Picardy, very neatly designed trenches could be cut to any depth in the hard chalk. In most parts of the line the trenches varied between these two extremes, and life was a struggle to dry and drain and dig what the weather and the enemy's bombardment were continually destroying. To keep a trench habitable there were two necessities: a scientific drainage scheme must be planned to carry off mud and water into a deep pit (a 'sump hole'); and the sides of the trench had to be prevented from falling in by 'revetment,' that is by lining the trench with pit props, or brushwood, or sandbags well bonded together and hammered tight with the flat of a spade. In fact, no set of trenches ever was kept in

Digitized by Google

perfect condition, and the more complete were these works the more likely would it be that the enemy would observe and bombard them. It may be noticed that the Germans were far cleverer than we at trench design and repair, so that to capture a German trench usually meant to move from discomfort to comfort.

To defend a position, much more than a single line of trenches was required. When a position was occupied for any length of time an attempt would be made to complete at least two parallel trenches perhaps two hundred yards apart, a front line occupied by sentry posts, and a support line where most of the men off duty lived in dugouts. Communication trenches would be dug when time permitted from the front line back to the support line, and then farther back still until they reached a point invisible to the enemy. After two years' trench warfare some communication trenches were three miles long. If front line, support line and communication trenches were in good condition, which did not often occur, trench reliefs and working-parties could move about by day. Otherwise all movement had to be done by night and over the top. Dugouts began as mere cavities scooped into the side of a trench. Bit by bit they would be extended, lined with boards, strengthened with beams and courses of sandbags until they became more or less proof against splinters of shell. The only dugouts safe from a

Digitized by Google

direct hit by a high-explosive shell were 'mine dugouts,' underground chambers reached by an inclined shaft made like the gallery of a coal mine. To be safe a dugout needed a shaft at least fifteen feet deep. One we observed on Mont St. Quentin began at the bottom of the vaults of a church and ran down for forty-seven steps.

To complete a trench system two more things were required: barbed wire and 'strong points.' A barbed-wire entanglement would be erected about twenty or thirty yards in front of each line of trenches. Three lines of posts would be hammered into the ground—in silence and darkness—and barbed wire would be cris-crossed from post to post. This simple obstacle could be strengthened by loose tangles of barbed wire coiled among the stakes or by various stock pattern wire frames, called 'gooseberries,' 'knife-rests' and what not, which could be prepared in the trench and hastily fixed in front of it by night. Behind the support line it was important to prepare a number of strong points or redoubts. These were little fortresses designed in terms of trenches and wire, where a small permanent garrison could hold out even if the main trench lines were taken by the enemy. The endless technical work required to maintain these trenches was done by the officers and men who were holding the line, with some supervision by the Royal Engineers.

Digitized by Google

On the average the front lines of the two armies were from one to four hundred yards apart, and the middle of No Man's Land was green and empty, since no one had occasion to bombard it. Hence in 1915 and 1916 a battle had to begin with a conventional trench-to-trench attack ' over the top ' (or ' over the plonk ' as a slang phrase of 1916 put it). First you must destroy the enemy's wire by shell-fire and make gaps in your own through which to emerge. Then at zero hour you climbed over the top of your trench, raced across No Man's Land and occupied the enemy's front line, if you could do it. Once there, the battle was sure to resolve itself into a scurry of bomb-fighting in which parties of men rushed up and down the trenches throwing bombs at one another, a most unsatisfactory employment, exceedingly unpleasant and rarely leading to decisive victory for either party. Bombs had to be used because of the tortuous plan on which trenches are always dug. If a trench were a straight ditch the enemy might be able to place themselves in such a position as to ' take it in enfilade,' that is, to fire along it from end to end, which is avoided by making a kink in the trench every five or ten yards. The straight lengths in which men stand up to fire at the enemy are called ' bays ' of a fire trench, and the kinks are called ' traverses.' When moving about in trenches you turn a corner every few yards, which makes it seem like walking in a maze. It is

Digitized by Google

impossible to keep your sense of direction and infinitely tiring to proceed at all, squeezing past people at narrow bends, paddling through mud and water, climbing over obstructions made by shell-fire and being caught under the chin or across the ankles by trailing telephone wires to some forward signal station. It is usually in the dark that you go on this pilgrimage, and either with fifty pounds of kit on your back, or worse still, with a load of pit props, barbed wire, sandbags and corrugated iron. When trenches had been fought over, the confusion became the greater. Instead of neat parallel trench lines you made the best use of existing trenches which might run in any direction other than the one you would prefer, until an old battlefield like the Somme became a labyrinth of trenches without any plan. Here you might find yourself living only twenty yards from the enemy, separated by a bomb-stop, or barricade to prevent him rushing along the trench to throw bombs at you.

The intensity of artillery fire grew so great in the middle of the war that permanent trench lines became untenable. During 1917 bomb fighting in trenches gave way to the shell-hole warfare described in the second of these episodes, and in 1918 to open fighting of the traditional kind in which tanks and cavalry played a large part.

The ordinary weapons used by infantry in war are the rifle, bayonet and the machine-gun, which

Digitized by Google

is an automatic weapon for firing rifle-bullets. In the British army machine-guns were very scarce when the war began. In 1915 a new light automatic weapon called the Lewis-gun was bought from the Belgians and given experimentally to front-line troops. During the Battle of the Somme there were two per company, at Passchendaele four, and by the end of the war the number had been increased to eight. Lewis-guns were taken into the forefront of the battle, while the heavier and more reliable machine-guns of the older pattern were kept in positions where they could be treated with more respect. All automatic guns fire so rapidly that it is difficult to keep them supplied with ammunition, so that it often happened to a Lewis-gunner that he might get his gun to the appointed place while the rest of his section, struggling under the weight of the ammunition, made up in round pans and carried in canvas buckets, went astray.

Most of the artillery used in the war consisted of light field-guns drawn by horses and firing a shell weighing from fifteen to eighteen pounds at a range of two or three miles. The English field-gun was an 'eighteen pounder'; the famous French 'seventy-fives' and the German 'whizz-bang' guns were, roughly speaking, equivalent. All these field-guns were used for firing on the enemy's front line, to make his infantry keep their heads down while your infantry advanced. They

Digitized by Google

generally used shrapnel shells which burst high in the air, throwing a rain of bullets forward and downward. Clever gunnery consisted in bursting shrapnels just in front of your infantry to give them a protective screen or 'barrage' of explosions, and if this screen was slowly moved forward, which could be done by regularly altering the range of the guns, it was called a 'creeping barrage.' In trench warfare heavy guns, firing much larger and more highly explosive shells, were largely used; in open fighting they were more rare. There are numerous types of heavy guns belonging to one or other of the two classes, high-velocity guns and howitzers. A high-velocity gun, as its name implies, fires a shell which travels very fast and almost in a straight line, so that, like a whizzbang, it hardly gives any warning of approach. A howitzer lobs a heavy shell very high into the air and drops it on the target. The shell travels comparatively slowly and can be heard in its flight for many seconds. For heavy shells there were many cant names: we generally called them 'crumps.'

These weapons were reinforced in trench warfare by many improvised devices. Numerous kinds of hand grenades were tried by every army: the British finally settled on the Mills bomb, an oval-shaped object which could be bowled like a cricket ball with a full pitch of thirty or forty yards. Many inventions were made for dis-

Digitized by Google

charging bombs from a rifle to a longer range, and many kinds of trench-mortars were used for hurling larger bombs into the enemy lines, one being the gas-projector which threw a cylinder of poison gas to a distance of 800 or 1,000 yards.

Digitized by Google

APPENDIX B

FORMATIONS

THE British Expeditionary Force in France and Flanders consisted of about two million men under command of Sir Douglas Haig. Many hundreds of thousands of these were administrative troops who worked at the base camps, railways, hospitals and other depôts, without ever hearing a shot fired in anger except when there was a German air raid. The great bulk of the combatant troops were organised in about fifty infantry divisions each commanded by a major-general. At full strength an infantry division contained nearly twenty thousand men, forming a self-contained, self-supporting unit able to conduct an independent campaign. It consisted of three infantry brigades with a proper proportion of artillery, engineers, pioneers, Army Service Corps to bring up supplies, and Army Medical Corps to look after the sick and wounded. Divisions were grouped together into Army Corps as the situation demanded, and Army Corps into five Armies under the Commander-in-chief. The other combatant troops, aeroplanes, cavalry, tanks and heavy guns were not

Digitized by Google

allotted to divisions but controlled by higher commanders.

The composition of an infantry brigade can be shown by a simple table :

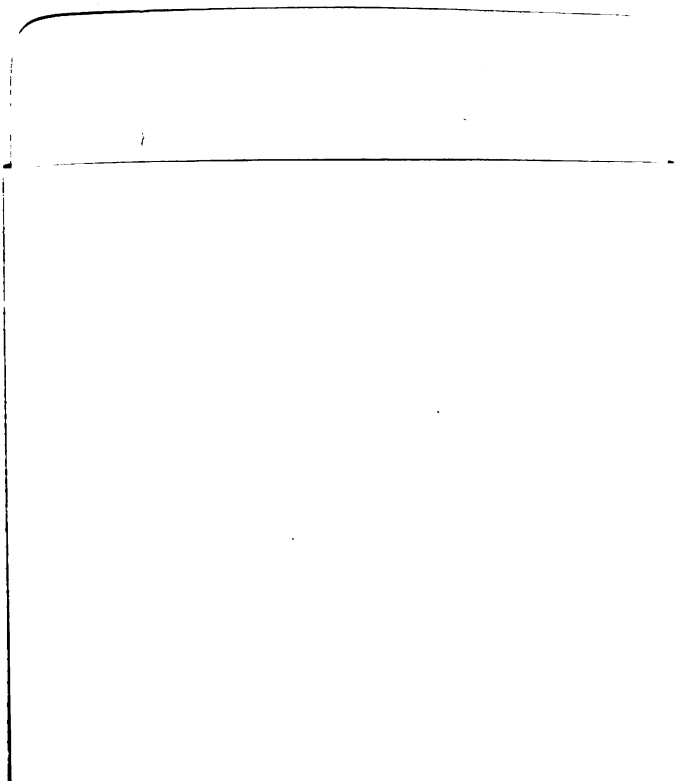
An infantry section is a corporal and about six men.
Four sections make a platoon commanded by a subaltern or serjeant.
Four platoons make a company commanded by a captain, who has several assistants making up his company headquarters.
Four companies make a battalion commanded by a lieutenant-colonel, who has a large battalion headquarters.
Four battalions make a brigade commanded by a brigadier, who has three staff officers at his headquarters.

The most important of these units is the battalion, which might consist of anything from five hundred to a thousand men according to the fortune of war. In time of peace English counties raise regiments each of several battalions, of which one may be in India, one at Aldershot and one a reserve at the depôt in the county town, while two or three more are territorial battalions. In time of war battalions are made up into brigades and divisions for which a sentimental feeling of esprit de corps arises independently of regimental

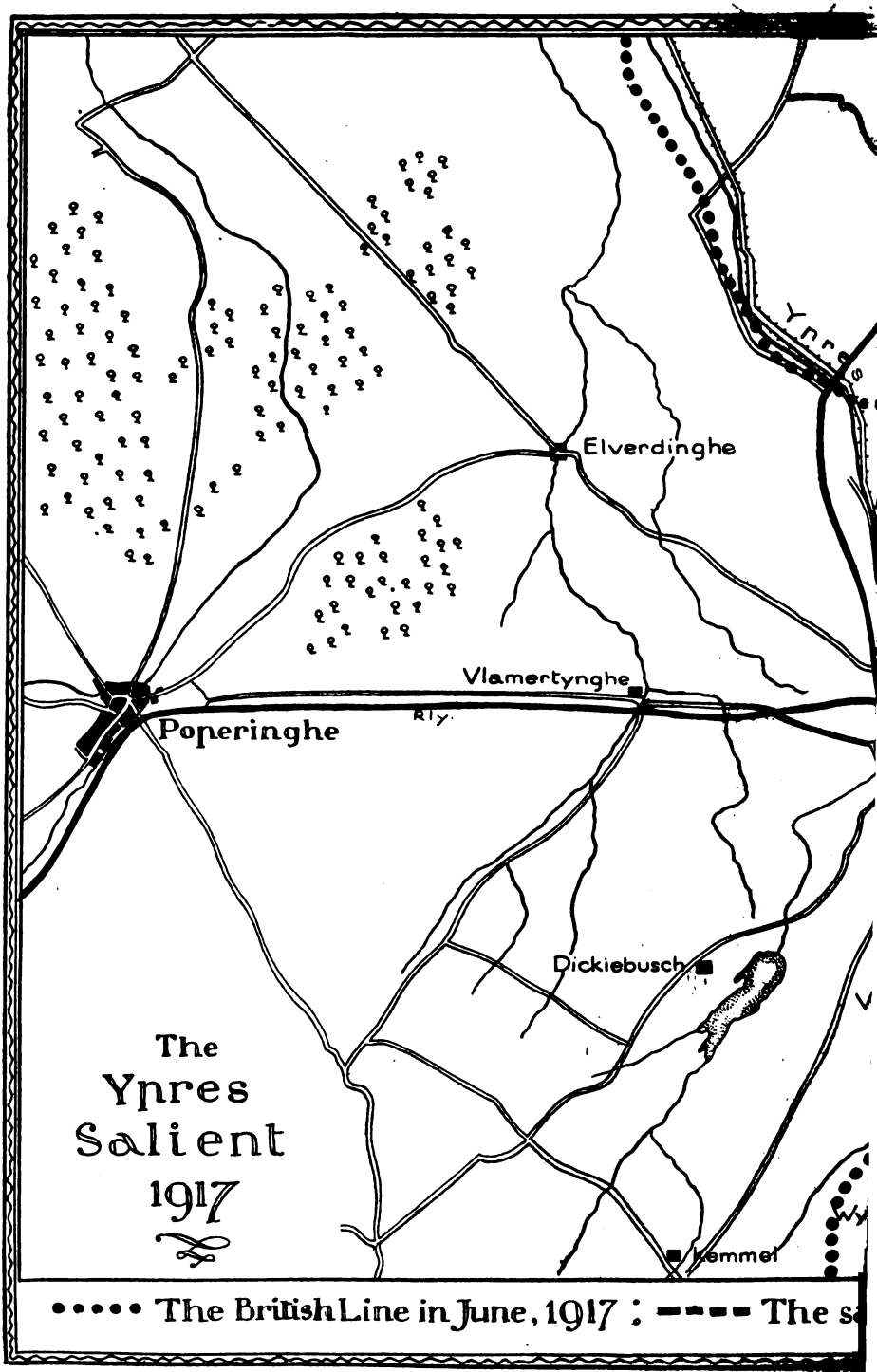
Digitized by Google

loyalty, because the battalions of a regiment may be scattered all over the world, whereas the units in a brigade are fighting side by side. The battalion is the link which binds men together permanently, whether on active service or at home. The colonel, commonly known as the Commanding Officer or C.O., is the highest officer who is personally known to all the men, and it is through the battalion staff that clothes, food and pay are distributed.

Digitized by Google

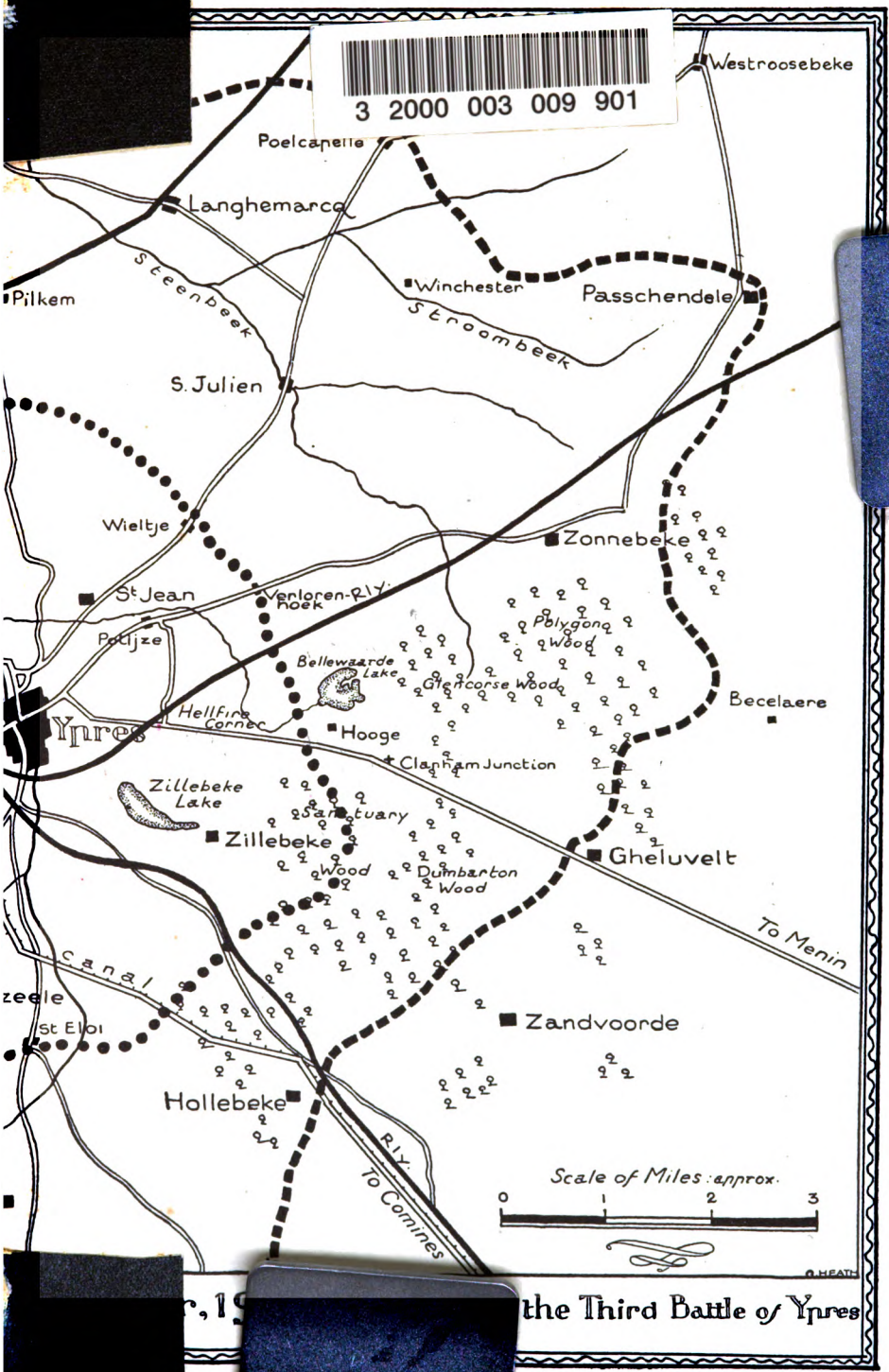


Digitized by Google



Digitized by Google

3 2000 003 009 901



the Third Battle of Ypres

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google